# MIDLIFE WOMEN'S JOURNEYS TO AND THROUGH THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

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presented to

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Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Vicki R. Wiltse

May 2012

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This Dissertation, written by

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Claremont School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

## **Doctor of Philosophy**

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#### Abstract

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#### Vicki R. Wiltse

This dissertation is a qualitative research study of why midlife women 35 to 64 years old decide to attend theological school and what their experiences of graduate theological education are. It analyzes the journeys of twenty-one women to theological school, describes them and their lives in relation to their experiences as seminary students, and summarizes their thoughts and feelings regarding courses, professors, and other aspects of theological education. A description is given of how seminary affected the participants' spiritual lives, theologies, and views of themselves, others, their faith traditions, and the world. Findings are placed in dialogue with related literature on midlife, women as learners, epistemological development, and theological and adult education. The dissertation concludes with suggestions for educators in theological school settings.

Through phenomenological analysis of interviews and questionnaires and comparison with midlife literature, it was determined that themes common to middle-aged women's lives frequently played a role in research participants' processes of deciding to go to theological school. Many participants were motivated by a sense of call to pursue a seminary education. In the midst of their busy lives, relationships and the support of family and friends were important to midlife women seminarians. Participants valued theological professors who were knowledgeable and passionate about their subject matter, competent as educators and classroom managers, personable, and compassionate and caring. The most common frustrations participants had related to heavy workloads

(which meant little time for reflection and processing) and to a lack of structures and accommodations for commuter students. Many of the participants became more accepting and respectful of people from different theological perspectives, sexual orientations, religious traditions, and cultures. They grew in self-confidence and self-esteem and in their ability to be empathic and compassionate. Several participants developed and modified their theological and biblical understandings and became more spiritually aware and grounded. To move toward the goal of transformative learning, seminary professors are encouraged to practice engaged, relational feminist pedagogies that build trust with students.

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I am grateful to the members of the Upland Community of Christ who helped me in various ways and provided me with a religious home. Sally Welch and the members of the Walk, Dance, Pray group were similarly a surrogate family of encouragement and care for me, while my colleagues in the Ph.D. program in practical theology were a peer support group and friends with whom to share ups and downs. In Michigan, the Coleman Community of Christ has been a continuous source of love and support. I am grateful to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Midland, which not only gave me a job to which I could apply my specialized knowledge and skills, but provided me with a community of people in Michigan who understood the academic process in which I was engaged.

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special blessing to me. We found connections between our religious traditions, and she shared her spirit, wisdom, and experiences with me; she prayed for me and mentored me into the world of academia, while teaching me to be multiculturally aware and sensitive. Following Elizabeth, Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook came to CST and energetically took over as the chairperson for my qualifying exams, ensuring that that process went smoothly. She then facilitated the process of getting my dissertation proposal approved, and she has been gracious in working with me long-distance on dissertation drafts and gathering signatures for forms that needed to be turned in. I am also grateful to Frank Rogers and Kathleen Greider for working with me on qualifying exams and this dissertation. It has not escaped my awareness that they have provided a sense of connection and continuity between my time as an M.Div. student and my Ph.D. work. Likewise, it was a joy to find many of the same, friendly staff members at the library at CST when I returned there and to work with them again. Thank you to Gene Fieg, Elaine Walker, Koala Jones, and Betty Clements for being my library teachers and to Elaine for also being my thesis secretary.

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to reflect on myself and my life and to discern carefully what I value and what I want to do next on my own journey. Thank you, Annie Wells, Ann Thomas, Stacy L. Thomas, Lorraine Ceniceros, Brenda Bos, Sister Vera Alice Bagneris, Beth Mueller, Terri Wyborny Gibbons, Jody Topping, Cheryl Reagan, Amanda Burr, and all the other women who contributed to this project.

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This dissertation is dedicated in memory of my father, Victor Wiltse, and my grandfather, Alvin Wiltse, who both supported me as I began my Ph.D. program, but did not live to see me finish it.

#### CHAPTER 1

#### Introducing the Terrain

In the 1990s, theologian Rebecca Chopp critiqued recent writings on theological education in her book, Saving Work. While writings by male authors recognized the same issues as those raised in feminist writings on theological education (including a lack of integration in curricula), their strategies for addressing these issues were, she observed, "ideational, formulating an abstract ideal to offer some vantage point of unity amid the fragmentation and pluralism." Chopp suggested that "the second generation of literature on theological education needs to remake the formal method of the first generation of writers into practical methods that investigate contemporary reality." Investigating the contemporary, concrete reality of theological education means asking the question, "Who are the subjects of theological education?"<sup>3</sup> Chopp had found that works on theological education published in the 1980s and '90s had, for the most part, ignored "the dramatic changes in the student body of theological education. Though there is occasional recognition in texts of the presence of women and blacks, almost all texts fail to consider the phenomenon of second-career students."4 At the time Chopp wrote her book, women constituted more than fifty percent of the student body of some theological schools, and in 1995, the year her book was published, approximately twelve percent of theological

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Rebecca S. Chopp, Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Chopp, 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Chopp, 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Chopp, 12.

school students were over 50.5 Many of these older students were likely embarking on second careers.

The over-50 group of students has continued to grow since 1995, and has become "the fastest-growing age group among students at theological schools," constituting twenty percent of theological school students in 2009.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, 55.5 percent of entering students over 50 that year were women.<sup>7</sup> Observing a trend toward large numbers of midlife women enrolled in theological schools, I decided to focus my dissertation research efforts on this group of students. As Chopp asserted, before theorizing about the future of theological education, there is a need to look at the changing demographics of theological school students and to ask questions such as,

What does it matter that so many of our students are women (and, for other projects, second-career men)? What do these women want in theological education? Why do so many women say they come to seminary for opportunities for theological challenge and growth, and not necessarily to prepare for ordination?<sup>8</sup>

For Chopp, "A feminist approach to theological education begins by attending to the subjects and asking what is going on for them in theological education." This dissertation does just that. It focuses on an overlooked but significant and growing group of students in theological schools—midlife women between the ages of 35 and 64—and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Chopp, ix; Eliza Smith Brown, "Fastest Growing Age Group," Association of Theological Schools, Commission on Accrediting, http://www.ats.edu/Documents/FastestGrowingAgeGroup.pdf (accessed Oct. 25, 2011), 1-2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Eliza Smith Brown, 1-2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Calculations based on "Table 3: Enrollment of Student by Age, Marital Status, and Gender," in Association of Theological Schools, Commission on Accrediting, "Student Information Project: Entering Student Questionnaire, 2009-2010 Profile of Participants," http://www.ats.edu/Resources/Student/Documents/Questionnaire/ ESQ/2009-2010ESQ.pdf (accessed Feb. 1, 2010).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Chopp, 12-13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Chopp, 13.

seeks to answer the questions, "Why are they coming to seminary? What are their experiences as theological school students?"

Searching various electronic databases, I could find little that had been written since 1990 about North American women's experiences with theological education, and nothing about midlife women and theological education specifically. <sup>10</sup> However, according to The Association of Theological Schools' report on students who entered theological schools during the 2009-2010 school year, over one-third (36.3 percent) of all women entering these schools were 36-55 years old. <sup>11</sup> At Claremont School of Theology (CST), the context of my study, fifty-four percent of students enrolled during the Fall 2009 semester were female, <sup>12</sup> and approximately sixty percent of them were women between 35 and 64 years old. <sup>13</sup> About one-third of the total number of students at CST during the fall 2009 semester were midlife women. <sup>14</sup> Therefore, middle-aged women are a significant group of students at North American theological schools, particularly ones like CST that are affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations. Yet no systematic research has been done on why these women are choosing to pursue a graduate theological education nor on what their experiences of this education are. If such schools

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 10}$  I searched various databases within EBSCOHost and the Dissertations Abstracts database.

Calculations based on "Table 3: Enrollment of Student by Age, Marital Status, and Gender" in Association of Theological Schools. This table groups everyone 56 or older into one category, so I limited my calculations of midlife students to the 36-55 age range.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Claremont School of Theology, Office of the Registrar, "Spring 2010 Student Demographics," May 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Calculations based on Claremont School of Theology's "Enrollment for Fall Report Period" sections of "ATS Enrollment 2009: Enrollment Summary of Students by Age and Gender Fall Data," compiled for Commission on Accrediting, Association of Theological Schools, Oct. 2009. This report has a separate age grouping for those in the 50-64 age range, so I was able to expand "midlife" to include those in that range.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Calculations based on data from Claremont School of Theology, "Enrollment for Fall Report Period."

desire to be successful in serving all their students, it behooves them to pay specific attention to the needs and desires of their midlife women students.

This qualitative research study focuses on midlife women who were enrolled as master's degree students at Claremont School of Theology during the Spring 2010 semester. I decided to focus on master's level students because they were more likely to have made the decision to attend theological school as midlife adults. The midlife women doctoral students I knew began their theological education careers before they were 35. With this limitation, I was able to consider age and life stage as factors in women's decisions to go to seminary. I find it noteworthy that, in the fall of 2009, the largest group of master's degree women students at CST was aged 50-64, while the largest group of men doing master's degrees was 25-34 years old.<sup>15</sup>

The primary goal of this research project is to help theological schools understand a significant demographic among their students: midlife women. This study will address why midlife women choose to go to seminary, what they expect and want from theological education, and how they experience and perceive their theological educations. Specifically, I will describe the processes by which one group of women decided to attend seminary and the factors that influenced that decision. I will also describe these women's lives as students, their thoughts and critiques about diverse aspects of theological education, and how their seminary experiences affected and changed them in various ways. From these descriptions and analyses of them, I will draw some conclusions about what brings midlife women to seminary, what they desire from

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Calculations based on data from Claremont School of Theology, "Enrollment for Fall Report Period."

theological education, and how theological schools can better serve this population of students. I hope that this work brings about changes in theological schools and the ways professors design and teach their courses such that midlife women seminarians benefit. In addition, I hope that midlife women seminarians find affirmation in knowing that others share their experiences.

According to Jeanie Allen, Diane Dean, and Susan Bracken, "For at least the past 40 years, the majority of students in higher education have been women." This phenomenon has sparked a variety of research projects and other works on gender bias and discrimination in higher education policies, funding, environments, curricula, and pedagogies. As a result, significant changes have been made that have benefitted all students, not just women. For example, the numbers of women in graduate schools and professional programs has increased to the point that their numbers are now "equal to, if not greater than, their male counterparts." This may not be true at theological schools connected with traditions that restrict women from serving as clergy, but it is a reality at schools like CST. Nonetheless, "gender-biased patterns still dominate many classrooms," and "unless we continue reminding academe of gender bias, it quickly takes root." Chopp observed that traditional educational models, including those of theological education, are designed for young adults, particularly white, middle class, heterosexual

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Jeanie K. Allen, Diane R. Dean, and Susan J. Bracken, "Introduction: Women Learners on Campus: What Do We Know and What Have We Done?" in *Most College Students Are Women: Implications for Teaching, Learning, and Policy*, ed. Jeanie K. Allen, Diane R. Dean, and Susan J. Bracken (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2008), 2.
<sup>17</sup> Allen, Dean, and Bracken, 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> David Sadker, "Foreword," in *Most College Students Are Women: Implications for Teaching, Learning, and Policy*, ed. Jeanie K. Allen, Diane R. Dean, and Susan J. Bracken (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2008), xii.

males. <sup>19</sup> The aim of Western education has been toward developing autonomy in students, an aim with hidden anthropological assumptions that do not fit the current student populations of theological schools and our postmodern world. <sup>20</sup> In addition, theological schools continue to design programs according to a modernist model that separates courses into distinct disciplines. There tend to be few opportunities and little guidance for integrating these disciplines. Since many women favor and learn best through relationships and connections, it is likely that midlife women attending seminary will experience alienation and disempowerment in some aspects of their educations. In this dissertation, I examine women seminarians' comments to discern ways in which contemporary theological education may discriminate against women students—in particular, midlife women students—and fail to address their specific educational needs and preferred ways of learning.

My interest in the topic of midlife women seminarians is based on my studies of Jungian psychology and transformative learning, my passion for women's studies, my experiences as a midlife woman in a Ph.D. program at CST, and my experiences as a younger student in other programs. As an undergraduate student, a lot of the people in my elementary education classes were midlife women. When I came to CST in 1995 as an M.Div. student, I was one of a handful of female students under 30. It seemed like most of the M.Div. students were over 40. As a teaching assistant for CST's introductory

<sup>19</sup> Chopp, 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Daniele D. Flannery and Elisabeth Hayes note that "self-direction and autonomy" are elitist learning goals that "reinforce a Western, middle-class, White masculinist value system." See "Women's Learning: A Kaleidoscope," in *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning*, Elisabeth Hayes, Daniele D. Flannery, et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 5-6.

religious education course in the fall of 2009, I participated in an exercise in which the participants in the class divided up according to the years we were born. There was something of a gap between those born after 1975 and those born before 1960: only three of us were born between 1960 and 1971. So, in my own experience, I have observed a continuous trend of women going back to school after raising children and/or pursuing first careers.

#### Nature of This Research Project

This dissertation is based on a qualitative research study of twenty-one midlife women who were students at Claremont School of Theology during the Spring 2010 semester. Data was collected through interviews, questionnaires, and email and phone conversations. This data has been analyzed using principles of phenomenological research and then placed in dialogue with literature connected to midlife development, women's ways of knowing and learning, and theological and adult education.

I sought to apply feminist research principles to the process of my research, analysis, and writing. To maintain the dignity and integrity of each woman who participated in this study, I tried to honor her voice and represent her story and perspectives empathically and accurately. In doing so, I valued each participant's experience, recognizing and acknowledging individuality and difference. In addition, I invited and encouraged the women's participation in every aspect of the study, while at the same time, I recognized that they had many demands placed on their time and energy.

According to Colleen Reid and Wendy Frisby, reflexivity is an important

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> A few of the women were jointly enrolled at or had taken classes through the Episcopal Theological School at Claremont, which is housed on CST's campus and holds classes on Fridays and Saturdays.

principle of good feminist research practice. While they acknowledge that it is difficult to find a consensus on what *reflexivity* means, they present it as "attempting to make explicit the power relations and the exercise of power in the research process." My studies of feminist thought and critical pedagogy made me sensitive to issues of power going into my research, so reflecting on power dynamics was a part of my research process.

While I had been in a position of power over some of the research participants in the past as a teaching assistant and, in one case, as a professor, this did not seem to affect their participation in this study. Before being Anne's professor, we had been together in two or three classes that I audited. As a professor, I tried not to put myself in a power-over position. We also are close to the same age (only a week apart, as I discovered through my data collecting), and when I was her professor, we had discovered we shared a struggle with a particular medical condition. Still, when I interviewed Anne, I worried that her experience of me as a professor would affect her responses. She may have avoided saying anything directly personal about my teaching, assignments, and grading, but I felt she was open and trusting in her conversation with me, maybe because of the other things we had in common. I had not been involved in assigning grades to any of the other participants' work in the past, so that was not a factor in our relating. However, the fact that I was a Ph.D. student may have placed me in a position of higher esteem and thus, greater distance, in the minds of some of the women. At the same time, there was a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Colleen Reid and Wendy Frisby, "Continuing the Journey: Articulating Dimensions of Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR)," in *The Sage Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, ed. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 100.

comradeship in my also having once been an M.Div. student at the same school, and I was still a student, worked as a student in CST's library, and participated in some student activities with the participants. This comradeship and equality as a fellow student may have provided grounds for the women to trust me more than they might have otherwise.

Conversely, I often felt like I was in a subordinate position to some of these women. As a 39-year-old at the time of data collection, I was younger than most of the women who participated in this research project, so I felt my lack of seniority and life experience. I also found myself admiring and wishing that I had the strength, the resiliency, the positive life perspective, the energy, and the spiritual convictions that I heard expressed by many of these women.

Writing about how feminist research methodologies need to be committed to women's empowerment and liberation, Nicola Slee points out that being involved in research can be empowering, because "participants are offered the opportunity to reflect on and re-evaluate their experiences as part of the research process, and this may well empower them to act upon their experience in new ways." Participation in a study can be especially empowering for people who feel marginalized, because it gives them an opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences and to have these taken seriously. They may also feel a sense of affirmation in being able to contribute significantly to increased understanding of a particular issue or issues. The empowerment that comes from being invited to remember and reflect on one's experiences in an interview context was reflected in the following comment by one of my research participants: "This has

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 49.

been good for me, because I have been able to articulate a lot of things that kind of roll around in my mind that I haven't been able to put words to."

Racial, ethnic, and cultural differences may have affected my interpretation of what women said and their experiences. In an attempt to preclude the possibility that I might make assumptions or draw conclusions that were inaccurate or misrepresentative, I often asked women I interviewed questions of clarification or reflected back what I heard them saying. This frequently led to clarification and further explication. However, at least one of the women I interviewed lacked fluency in English, so there was a significant language barrier to her fully responding to my questions.

To further prevent misinterpretation and misrepresentation, I have also shared drafts of this text throughout the process of its development with the women who participated in the study, and I have given them the opportunity to respond with additions, corrections, and clarifications. One participant asked me to change something I said about her in Chapter 5, while another wrote, "You have represented our conversations well." Two women made affirming comments about my first draft of Chapter 2, and one of them wanted me to send Chapter 5 to her Board of Ordained Ministry because of what I wrote about "women's cognitive abilities reaching their peak in their early 60's." In essence, though, I have held the power of interpretation and reporting. While I have encouraged feedback on drafts of this dissertation, I have decided what to include, and I have provided my interpretations of the data. I also retain ownership of this work.

#### <u>Definitions of Theological School and Seminary</u>

The term *seminary* is commonly associated with schools or colleges that prepare persons for professional ministry. A *theological school* is a graduate school that provides "professional and academic degree programs to educate persons for the practice of ministry and for teaching and research in the theological disciplines." Thus, a theological school is an institution with a broader range of programs than a seminary. While this distinction can be made between the two terms, I will use *theological school* and *seminary* interchangeably. One reason for this is that *seminary* is shorter and lends itself to being used as an adjective. *Seminarian* is also less awkward than *theological school student*. In addition, it might be argued that Claremont School of Theology, the context for my research, has primarily functioned as a seminary. It is affiliated with the United Methodist Church and has a long tradition of educating persons for Christian ministry. Even in the Spring 2010 semester, approximately 40 percent of the students were Master of Divinity (M.Div.) students, making this the most populous degree program at CST.<sup>25</sup>

#### Definitions and Descriptions of Midlife/Middle Age

Midlife and middle age are interchangeable terms, but I prefer the former. To me, "middle aged" sounds older, and I think of women and men who are slowing down and putting on weight. "Midlife" sounds more positive to me, like there is a lot of energy and life left in a person. Definitions of midlife or middle age vary from person to person and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Association of Theological Schools, Home Page, http://www.ats.edu/Pages/default.aspx (accessed Oct. 30, 2010).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Claremont School of Theology, Office of the Registrar.

among research studies on midlife and the lifespan. <sup>26</sup> The fourth edition of Webster's New World College Dictionary equates the terms, defining middle age as "the time of life between youth and old age: now usually the years from about 40 to about 65."27 After referring the reader to the "middle age" entry for a definition of midlife, the dictionary entry associates the latter term especially with midlife crisis. This association of "midlife" with "crisis" is significant in that it affected how some of the women in my research group responded to my use of the term midlife and how they perceived themselves in relation to the term. It may also be the reason why some women did not volunteer to participate in my study. The use of the language, "midlife crisis," raises negative images in the minds of many women. We think of men leaving their wives for younger women and going out and buying sports cars. We also imagine wives irresponsibly leaving their families to go on adventures and find themselves through various means: travel, education, New Age spirituality, and so on. For some women, it may simply be the association of the scary term crisis with the equally frightening concept of growing old. The media culture in the U.S. tells women that they must stay young at all costs, for to become an "old woman" means losing one's attractiveness to men and thus, losing what status one has in society. While the experience of a midlife crisis can be disturbing and disruptive of one's life, it does not have to be as horrible as it is often conceived and portrayed to be. Webster's offers this definition of midlife crisis: "the sense of uncertainty or anxiety about one's identity, values, relationships, etc. that some people experience in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James, "Charting the Course of Midlife Development: An Overview," in *Multiple Paths of Midlife Development*, ed. Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. "middle age."

midlife."28

As people have lived increasingly longer and healthier lives, understandings of the age range for midlife have shifted to older ages. Gail Sheehy notes that when she wrote her bestselling book, *Passages*, published in 1976, she was in her mid-thirties and saw that as "the halfway mark, the prime of life. The years between 35 and 45 I called the Deadline Decade, as if we had only until our mid-forties to resolve the crisis of midlife." Based on her research for the sequel to that book, *New Passages*, she observes that people "are taking longer to grow up and much longer to grow old. That shifts all the stages of adulthood ahead—by up to ten years." Thus, middle age has "been pushed far into the fifties—if it is acknowledged at all today." Still, we may see midlife perspectives begin to arise in some people in their mid-thirties.

In order to recruit women for my study, I used an age range of 35 to 64 to define "midlife" or "middle-aged." I chose 35 as the low end of midlife based upon Carl Jung's understanding that it is between 35 and 40 that the midlife transition often begins, particularly for women.<sup>32</sup> Realizing that some people never engage the tasks of midlife as described by Jung and that others do not do so until later in life, I determined that I would need to include women up to about 60 years of age in my research group, especially if I

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Webster's, s.v. "midlife."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Gail Sheehy, New Passages: Mapping Your Life across Time (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), xi.

<sup>30</sup> Sheehy, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Sheehy, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> C. G. Jung, "The Stages of Life," in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, v. 8 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 395. Jung says, "Statistics show a rise in the frequency of mental depressions in men about forty. In women the neurotic difficulties generally begin somewhat earlier. We see that in this phase of life—between thirty-five and forty—an important change in the human psyche is in preparation."

wanted to be sure to incorporate women who had begun seminary at younger ages. When I looked at the statistical data from The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), however, I found that there was no age division between 50 and 64. Therefore, I decided to extend my definition of midlife up until 64, which fits with Sheehy's findings and the definition given by *Webster's New World College Dictionary*.

Carl Jung was perhaps the first modern person to develop a theory of psychological development in midlife. <sup>33</sup> Before him, personality development was generally understood to be completed by the end of childhood. Since Jung's work is commonly referenced today in literature on midlife and it influenced my research questions and approach, I will provide a summary of his theory in the next section. Erik Erikson's theory of lifespan psychosocial development has also had a great deal of influence on midlife studies, so I will discuss his theory in the following section. <sup>34</sup> Finally, I will summarize two large-scale research studies conducted after 1989 that examined the life experiences and development of midlife women. Since these studies focused on middle-aged women in generational cohorts close to those of the women in my study, they are particularly relevant to my research project.

#### Carl Jung's Theory of Individuation

For Carl Jung, the development of the personality in the first half of life is focused on the maturation of a stable ego (center of consciousness) and "adaptation to outer

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Woman's Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Levinson's research is frequently cited in midlife literature as well. However, it is his research on men that is usually referenced. His research on women was based on the lifespan development model of the first study on men, and it only included housewives and career women up to 45 years old. This and the fact that the interviews for the study were conducted in the early 1980s made it less relevant to the female participants in my research.

reality."35 Adaptation to outer reality involves forming a persona that enables one to function in society. One's persona is the "face" that one shows to the world. To develop the persona, we learn which traits, beliefs, aspirations, behaviors, and so on are acceptable and which are not. Those aspects of our personality and being that are considered unacceptable and unwelcome in our outer world are repressed, that is, pushed down into the corners of our unconscious psyches. They end up forming what Jung called the shadow. Our shadow sides commonly come back to haunt us in midlife. The development of a stable ego—one that "is at once elastic and capable of resistance"—is dependent on the corresponding differentiation of an individual's attitude (extraversion or introversion) and her or his dominant function of consciousness (thinking, feeling, intuiting, or sensing). 36 This differentiation of attitude and function is one condition for successfully negotiating the individuation process, which begins in midlife. Jung believed that we normally go about our lives using one or two dominant functions, but in midlife, a person's inferior function begins coming to the fore. This may explain changes in personality that are experienced by oneself and observed by others when one is in the middle stage of life.

Jung observed that around midlife, certain types of shifts begin to take place in the human psyche:

At first it is not a conscious and striking change; it is rather a matter of indirect signs of a change which seems to take its rise in the unconscious. Often it is something like a slow change in a person's character; in another case certain traits may come to light which had disappeared since childhood; or again, one's previous inclinations and interests begin to weaken and others take their place.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Jolande Jacobi, *The Way of Individuation*, trans. R.F.C. Hall (New York: New American Library, 1967), 27, 30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Jacobi, 35.

Conversely—and this happens very frequently—one's cherished convictions and principles, especially the moral ones, begin to harden and to grow increasingly rigid. 37

People have a tendency to turn inward in midlife and to devote serious attention to their inner selves. Confronted with the reality of their mortality, many people take stock of their lives at this time. They contemplate what needs to be discarded and determine the endeavors that are still worth pursuing. Values change or shift. There is a movement toward transcending the ego by making contributions to the future via children, work, community service, political action, and so on. However, those people who have "too much unlived life" may get caught up in looking back at their past and not move forward into the future.<sup>38</sup> A conflict may arise between an awareness of one's aging and the sense of possibility for and urge toward further psychic and spiritual development. Midlife can be a time of upheaval as "everything cries out for readjustment" and one begins asking what one's life is all about.<sup>39</sup> Various events in people's lives can initiate or come to characterize this midlife disturbance, including illness, the death of a parent, divorce, or a change in jobs or careers. While some people struggle and suffer through their midlife transitions, others slowly and almost imperceptibly move into the second half of their lives. Yet the former are more likely to achieve psychic harmony and wholeness—the aim of Jung's individuation process—because they have more consciously engaged the unconscious components of their psyches.

Jung, "Stages of Life," 395.
Jung, "Stages of Life," 401.
Jacobi, 22.

Jung defined *individuation* as a "coming to selfhood' or 'self-realization." It is a process of psychological development in which a person fulfills the qualities that are a part of her or his nature. In other words, individuation means becoming who one is in one's own uniqueness and coming into harmony with oneself, so one acts in ways that are conformable with one's "true self." Individuation involves a gradual process of transformation leading to the integration of the conscious and unconscious dimensions of the self. This unity of the self is a goal that can only be reached in old age, if at all. However, the process typically begins in midlife as one realizes that one's persona is just that—a persona, a false self—and as the contents of one's personal shadow rise to the surface of consciousness. The shadow is the group of qualities that we rejected or neglected as we built up our egos and personas in the first half of life. It consists "partly of repressed, partly of unlived psychic features which . . . were from the outset excluded from consciousness and from active participation in life and were therefore repressed or split off."42 Thus, the shadow includes all those characteristics, desires, and emotions that were deemed unacceptable in childhood and young adulthood and were hidden away in one's psyche.

The first tasks of individuation, then, are to "divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona" and to become conscious of the shadow and integrate its contents into consciousness. <sup>43</sup> In other words, one needs to enter into a conscious relationship with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> C. G. Jung, "Part Two: Individuation," in *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, v. 7 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 174.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Jung, "Part Two: Individuation," 225.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Jacobi, 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Jung, "Part Two: Individuation," 174.

one's shadow without becoming dominated by it. The next major task is to engage the animus or anima: the unconscious masculine or feminine archetypal powers or energies within every woman or man, respectively. In childhood, one's father and mother represent the animus and anima. These human persons contribute characteristics to one's personal father and mother archetypes and to the animus or anima. Later in life, people project their anima or animus onto another person, with whom they fall in love. Part of the individuation process is to remove these anima/us projections. The anima/us not only is formed by personal psychic processes, it also draws on collective archetypal images and energies. Thus, it is able to function as a "natural bridge to the deepest layers of the psyche."44 To engage the anima/us is to connect with a part of "the unconscious even deeper than that of the shadow."45 It leads one into the depths of one's psyche and helps one adapt to one's inner world. In addition, the anima/us functions as a door to the Self, the center and organizing principle of one's psychic being and the archetype of wholeness.

To encounter the Self is to come into touch with that which is the goal of individuation, "for it is the completest expression of that fateful combination we call individuality."46 Individuation entails uniting conscious and unconscious aspects of the personality and creating "a permanent relationship between the ego and the Self." 47 It is not a linear process; it involves "progress and regress, flux and stagnation in alternating

<sup>47</sup> Jacobi, 64.

Jacobi, 44.
 Murray Stein, Jung's Map of the Soul: An Introduction (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Jung, "Part Two: Individuation," 240.

sequence."<sup>48</sup> It is rare for a person to achieve this "deep inner unity on a conscious level."<sup>49</sup>

#### Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Midlife Development

In Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, each stage of life is initiated by the ascendancy of a conflict or crisis that needs to be resolved through gaining certain ego qualities or strengths in order for a person to develop a vital, "healthy" personality. <sup>50</sup> When the environment makes new demands on a person, the crisis for the next stage arises. For Erikson, the word *crisis* is used "in a developmental sense to connote not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential." <sup>51</sup> It is "a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation." <sup>52</sup>

Compared to earlier stages, Erikson said little about his seventh stage of development, the stage of "adulthood," which falls between the stages of "young adulthood" and "old age." The conflict in this stage is that of "generativity vs. stagnation." Erikson defined generativity as "primarily the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation." However, the concept of generativity is not limited to having and raising one's own children. It may involve nurturing or mentoring others, generating new ideas and products, or engaging in "a kind of self-generation concerned

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Jacobi, 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Stein, Jung's Map of the Soul, 175.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 91-95.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, 96.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Erikson, Identity, Youth and Crisis, 138.

with further identity development." <sup>54</sup> Thus, it includes creativity and productivity as well as procreativity. If one fails to change and become generative, then one will regress to an earlier stage of development in the form of having an obsessive need for pseudo-intimacy or by becoming overly self-centered and self-indulgent. This leads to "a pervading *sense* of stagnation, boredom, and interpersonal impoverishment." <sup>55</sup>

The ego strength that emerges from successful resolution of the generativity crisis is the virtue of care. Care is "a widening commitment to *take care of* the persons, the products, and the ideas one has learned *to care for*." The danger is that care may be limited to particular persons and groups. "The unwillingness to include specified persons or groups in one's generative concern," choosing not to care for them, is called "rejectivity." This is the pathology or antipathy that may be expressed as a result of a failure to develop generative sympathy. The person who has developed genuine generativity will be perceived by younger persons as having true authority.

Nicola Slee notes that feminist scholars "have critiqued Erikson's model for its implicit bias towards separation and autonomy as primary developmental goals, with intimacy only appearing in the later stages." Erikson's theory may describe the typical Western, white male's pattern of development, but it does not represent women's experiences of growing in relationships and toward increasing connection. It also stands in opposition to "very different cultural models of development where individual identity

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*, extended version (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 67.

<sup>55</sup> Erikson, Identity, Youth and Crisis, 138.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Erikson, Life Cycle Completed, 67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Erikson, *Life Cycle Completed*, 68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Slee, 18.

is considered less important than kinship loyalty and commitment to the group."<sup>59</sup> In their qualitative research with midlife women, Lynn Calhoun Howell and Amy Beth have found that women are generative throughout most of their adult lives, and in midlife, they turn toward "investing scarce resources of money, emotional energy, and time in activities consistent with [their] unique value hierarchies" and their own self-actualization. <sup>60</sup> Yet, this movement toward self-actualization is also generative; it is self-generation through identity development. In addition, as midlife women engage in their personal identity development, they frequently find that they enjoy and value being involved in their children's and grandchildren's lives and contributing to the world beyond their families. <sup>61</sup>

#### Studies of Midlife

Researchers have become increasingly aware that "the phenomena of middle age are the result of recurrent but not inevitable complexes of intersecting physiological, psychological, social, cultural, and historical factors." People take various paths through the middle ages of their lives. These paths are affected by varying experiences, choices, personalities, and genetic constitutions. According to Ravenna Helson, a research psychologist who focuses on personality and adult development,

No major theorist argues for a normative midlife crisis in the sense of psychological disturbance. The evidence supports theories of adult development

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Slee, 18.

<sup>60</sup> Lynn Calhoun Howell and Amy Beth, "Pioneers in Our Own Lives: Grounded Theory of Lesbians' Midlife Development," *Journal of Women and Aging* 16, nos. 3/4 (2004): 135-36.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Sharon McQuaide, "Women at Midlife," Social Work 43, no. 1 (Jan. 1998): 27-28.
 <sup>62</sup> Ravenna Helson, "The Self in Middle Age," in Multiple Paths of Midlife Development,
 ed. Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 23.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Lachman and James, 2.

in showing that personality often changes across middle age toward increasing complexity, productivity, and altruism, and that there are often difficulties in making these changes. The nature of the difficulties and the way change is experienced have recurring features, though they also vary with the individual's psychological problems and resources and with social and cultural circumstances.<sup>64</sup>

Since the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s has affected how women's roles have been perceived in U.S. society, leading to more and more women working and having careers while caring for families, I sought out research on midlife women from recent decades to provide points of comparison with the women in my study. Two major research studies, which resulted in book-length publications, warrant summarization in this chapter: Terri Apter's study of eighty U.S. and British women (Secret Paths: Women in the New Midlife) and Sue Shellenbarger's study of fifty U.S. and Canadian women (The Breaking Point: How Female Midlife Crisis is Transforming Today's Women).

Apter. Beginning in 1990, Dr. Terri Apter, a psychologist, interviewed and observed eighty women between 39 and 55 years of age. About 65 percent of the women came from the U.S. and 35 percent from Britain. Her study included women from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, women who were married, divorcing, and single, and women with very young and adult children. Apter found that, although women's midlife development appeared to be a quiet, private process, there was "a deliberate acquisition of self-determination and self-definition" that occurred. Midlife was experienced as a turning point that opened up the possibility of moving in new directions. As women faced and worked through unresolved fears, constraints that had bound them, and new

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Helson, 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Terri Apter, Secret Paths: Women in the New Midlife (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 13.

challenges, anxieties, and pressures, they gained increasing certainty and self-confidence.

Apter states that each woman in her study who "emerged into the new midlife," a life not stuck in old patterns and depression, arrived there by going through a "crisis." 66 The crisis phase involved the disruption of the way each woman had perceived herself and ordered her goals and priorities. Questions emerged about who she was, who she wanted to be, and who she thought she should be. Around 40, the women became aware of the compromises they had made and the frustrations they had born in silence. Some experienced regret and doubt and felt the "panic of self-responsibility." However, this period passed as they began to assess what they wanted and what their strengths were. They realized that this was the time to pursue their neglected dreams and desires and to strive for their potential. A clear vision emerged of what they had accomplished in their lives and where they wanted to go. In midlife, the women regained a sense of their own experiential knowing and their own voice. At first, though, they may have gone through a period of bewilderment and anger that they had lived according to others' values, ideals, and judgments rather than trust themselves. Apter observes that "midlife development is the process whereby borrowed voices are returned and idealizations shattered."68 In their fifties, the women stopped seeing themselves through the eyes of others and through the images found in society and began to define themselves. These midlife women gained a stronger sense of themselves and their own power as they developed new skills for making choices, fulfilling their own needs, and working through their doubts and internal conflicts. Realizing that their lives were shaped by their own decisions, they took charge

Apter, 46.
 Apter, 21.
 Apter, 33.

of their lives in new ways.

As they redefined themselves, midlife women in Apter's study shifted from "a role personality," in which they identified themselves through their roles as mothers, spouses, daughters, etc., to "a subjectively centered personality, in which they spoke about how things felt and how things seemed to them." In other words, rather than describing themselves through their connections, positions, and achievements, they talked about their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. To achieve a subjectively-centered personality, one needs self-awareness and self-knowledge. With this subjective knowing comes increased confidence and assertiveness. As women become more in tune with what they feel, think, and want, they accept and trust themselves and their own experiences more. External judgments and expectations do not carry the weight they once did. Older women are more content and confident and less likely to second-guess their decisions and responses to events. While there was a lot of individual variation, Apter found that the challenges she came to associate with midlife crisis usually began during a woman's forties and were resolved in her early fifties. 70

With all the changes and growth that midlife women experience, it is not surprising that significant relationships in their lives are also frequently transformed. In Apter's study, "Forty was often cited as the magic age whereby a woman no longer cared in the same way about what her mother thought."<sup>71</sup> Although women stopped trying to please their mothers, they frequently developed a new concern not to hurt them, either. Other relationships with family members changed as well. In midlife, a hunger for

Apter, 35.
 Apter, 24.
 Apter, 279.

friendship was paralleled by a new way of relating. Listening and being nonjudgmental were the foundations for building trust. Understanding was expressed through caring about another's experience, rather than sharing it. However, the women had less time for friendships than they did when they were younger, so time-filling relationships were often set aside. Nonetheless, since friendship was a scarce and important resource, patient efforts were made to maintain those friendships that contributed to growth and served as sources of power.

While there was a common pattern of development among the women in Apter's study, Apter also distinguished four types of midlife women: traditional, innovative, expansive, and protesting. These types were "linked to past decisions, to definitions and assessments of power, and to female ideology—ideas about what a woman is, what a woman should be, and how being female affects each woman's life. Traditional women were the women in Apter's study who had chosen to focus their lives around their families, thus remaining mostly within the conventional framework of womanhood. They identified themselves in terms of their family roles as wives, mothers, or daughters, and their families' needs had priority over their own. However, as images of women changed and career women gained visibility and power, traditional women were burdened by an awareness of what they had given up. They were aware that other options were available to them and that they were not tied to traditional life patterns. Thus, they became increasingly frustrated "with the pressure of others' demands" and angry that they could

<sup>73</sup> Apter, 40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Apter points to a fifth type when she discusses women who were stalled in midlife and did not go through the growth processes others did. They were trapped by past ideals and obsession over what might have been, and they were unable to move beyond their failures, regrets, bitterness, and envy to take risks to change and to create a new future.

not focus on what they wanted.<sup>74</sup> In addition, they began worrying that their selfunderstandings did not match the perceptions others had of them. For a traditional woman, midlife crisis is characterized by "acute anxieties as to the value of what she has done and how to proceed with the rest of her life."75 Apter states that a traditional woman resolves her midlife crisis by gaining "more control over the extent of one's responsiveness to others' needs"; by forging "a strong link between what one wants and what one decides to do"; and by connecting "with that 'unseen' self, often through having more private time."<sup>76</sup>

"Innovative" women were women who deliberately set out to be career women in young adulthood. They may have "entered adulthood with a very strong sense of direction," and followed the model of the career man, including climbing the ladder of success to attain their goals.<sup>77</sup> Others may have intended to be traditional, "good" wives and mothers, yet "very early on, they found themselves on a different track." While most of them married or had children, they sought to change the conventional patterns of being a wife and mother. In the work world, they tended to measured personal success in terms of professional achievement. In midlife, though, innovative women found that striving for professional success and competing according to the rules of the male culture in the workplace had cost them too much. They began to realize that they had been running a rat race that they did not want to run anymore, and they began asking if there was not something more or different they desired. They reflected on all the ways they had

Apter, 110.
 Apter, 111.
 Apter, 111.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Apter, 41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Apter, 127.

been making compromises to suit their work. Questions arose as to who they wanted to be and where they wanted to go with their lives. These realizations and questions often led innovative women to reconsider their goals and transform their work environments or to change careers altogether.

"Expansive" women felt like they had been living in confinement, and they sought to break free of that. They had been curtailed in their self-development by their acceptance of others' expectations and by lack of skill, education, confidence, and or selfawareness. In midlife, they expanded their horizons, while guarding against a lapse back into former habits and patterns of behavior. Old restraints and obstacles were overcome as these women developed competencies and found new sources of energy. Many expansive women returned to education in midlife. They sought to retrieve neglected potentials and create a better future for themselves. Apter names three "signs of approaching crisis" for expansive women: anger as one becomes aware of "the unnecessary constraints others impose on one"; "increasing frustration at one's lack of skills or knowledge"; and "terror of change—balanced by a terror of stasis."<sup>79</sup>

"Protesting" women were women who had "spent their early adulthood—and sometimes a great deal of their childhood—being responsible and dependable."80 As midlife approached, they protested against growing older and more mature, because they felt they had missed being young. They wanted to turn back the clock and reclaim the spontaneity and adventurousness that circumstances had compelled them to leave behind. They longed to act irresponsibly. Protesting women were propelled by a sense of panic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Apter, 182. <sup>80</sup> Apter, 199.

that their youth and the opportunities that go with it might disappear before they had a chance to take advantage of them. However, some were constrained by past fears and a lack of confidence, while others felt overwhelmed by long-suppressed feelings of regret and anger. Protesting women did not resist change, but they struggled to find meaningful ways to move forward in their lives. To resolve her midlife crisis, a protesting woman needs to retrieve and refashion her past goals and desires, see her "maturity as a door to new opportunities," and learn to exercise spontaneity in her daily life without hazarding her well-being.<sup>81</sup>

Apter's findings have some parallels to Jungian descriptions of midlife transition. Specifically, they both observed that dreams, desires, or needs that have been suppressed commonly rise to the surface of consciousness in midlife, and the weight of unlived life draws attention to itself. However, Apter's study also uncovered characteristics of midlife transition that may be specifically associated with women. A study done by Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan in the 1980s revealed that adolescent girls often lost their voices and their sense of self as teenagers. Midlife, Apter found, is a time when contemporary women retrieve what was lost in adolescence and regain self-confidence. Cultural images of what it means to be a woman are challenged, and in contrast to cultural expectations, midlife women experience a new sense of their own power, one that does not rely on others' assessments. In addition, while young women may define themselves by their relationships and may suppress their desires and needs for the sake of relationships, midlife women gain new self-understandings and may leave old

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Apter, 200.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 2-5.

relationships if they are found to be too restraining. Relationships, including friendships, remain important, but they will look different in midlife women's lives.

Shellenbarger. Journalist Sue Shellenbarger's book, The Breaking Point, is mostly based on a study of fifty women from around the U.S. and from Toronto, Canada who all agreed that they had experienced a "turbulent midlife transition" between the ages of 38 and 55.83 These women held a variety of jobs outside the home, while some were strictly homemakers. Thirty-nine of them were mothers. Shellenbarger found that "their midlife crises began at ages ranging from 39 to 52; the average age was 44.6." In addition to interviews with these women, Shellenbarger drew upon data from other research studies and literature on midlife for her description of female midlife crises.

Like Jung and Apter, Shellenbarger found midlife crisis to be a time when old values and goals no longer seem worthwhile and "traits, needs, or desires that have been ignored or repressed [come] roaring back on center stage in one's personality."84 At this juncture, or "breaking point," women begin to leave parts of their lives behind as they search for new meaning and direction for the rest of their lives. This may occur consciously or unconsciously. Midlife women also realize that this is the time to pursue their dreams or to let them go.

Shellenbarger points out that "certain life circumstances and traits increase the odds that you will be among the 36 percent of women who eventually will have what they regard as midlife crises."85 These circumstances include stagnant marriages,

<sup>83</sup> Sue Shellenbarger, The Breaking Point: How Female Midlife Crisis is Transforming Today's Women (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), 243.

Shellenbarger, xv.Shellenbarger, 54.

unsatisfying or all-consuming careers, and lack of personally fulfilling and renewing pursuits. People who are depressed, have ignored and stored frustrations, are carrying a lot of emotional baggage from childhood, and tend to be more emotionally and relationally unstable are also more likely to experience midlife turbulence. In fact, "sadness, irritability, or a general unease" were common precursors to midlife crisis in Shellenbarger's group of women. 86 Other women experienced an emotional deadness in the months preceding their breaking points. In Shellenbarger's study, midlife crises were triggered by a variety of experiences. At the top of the list were marital issues, including affairs and divorces. The second most common type of triggering event was the death of one or more loved ones. Many women's crises were set off by "the strain of juggling too many work and family duties for too long" and by work-related stresses: job setbacks and other work-related problems, unacceptable behavior by employers, and the struggle to survive and succeed in corporate cultures.<sup>87</sup> Additional triggering events included health problems, major disappointments or difficulties with children, the empty nest or anticipation of it, and positive events, such as retiring early, receiving an inheritance, or having "a new religious or spiritual insight or experience."88

Many women feel alone in midlife. It is like entering a void or liminal, in-between place. The habits, behaviors, roles, and images that made up the persona fall away as one seeks to bring forth the lost and forgotten parts of oneself. Yet most women do not fall into despair or resort to overspending and extramarital affairs. The majority of the women

<sup>Shellenbarger, 9.
Shellenbarger, 9.
Shellenbarger, 8.</sup> 

Shellenbarger interviewed "undertook creative, constructive pursuits." They sought to make the most of their strengths as middle-aged women. Thirteen of them became deeply involved in religious or spiritual activities. 90 Many returned to college to pursue an interest or dream, while others changed to careers they found more meaningful or fulfilling. Shellenbarger observed that women who had juggled a lot of roles early in adulthood, who tended to dwell on the positive events in their lives, and who were competent in life skills had a greater chance of successfully negotiating their midlife crises. 91 In other words, they made positive, desired changes in their lives and emerged from midlife happier.

Drawing on Jungian psychology, Shellenbarger discerned six archetypes that were driving forces behind the midlife crises of the women in her study: the Adventurer, the Lover, the Leader, the Artist, the Gardener, and the Seeker. Women influenced by the Adventurer sought to overcome fear through physical exploration and excitement. This archetype helped these women rediscover the value of play. The archetype of the Lover drives a desire for intimacy, love, and sexual fulfillment. Thus, some women engaged in extramarital affairs, dated significantly younger men, left repressive relationships, or simply searched for deeper friendships. 92 Midlife women who found their own vision and strove to make a personally unique impact on the world were influenced by the Leader archetype, while the Artist caused some women to reorganize their lives around the purpose of creating art. The archetype of the Gardener was more mild, motivating women

<sup>89</sup> Shellenbarger, 11.

<sup>90</sup> Shellenbarger, 22.
91 Shellenbarger, 55-56.
92 Shellenbarger, 90.

to live in the moment, focus on their immediate surroundings, and invest in relationships and communal well-being. The Seeker was the most prevalent archetype in Shellenbarger's study: "It guides a woman's deep wish for connection with the religious, mystical, sacred, or truth-seeking side of herself." Some women pursued spiritual fulfillment in midlife, while for others, the Seeker functioned in a secondary role, inspiring change, grounding growth, or providing support during rough times.

# Synopsis of Midlife

The psychological literature on adult development considers midlife to be a transitional time for both women and men. Midlife is frequently a time when people realize they have been living for other people and decide to start living for themselves. They begin asking, "What am I doing here? What do I want to do with my life? Who do I want to be and become?" They wonder what they have been doing with their lives and what the meaning of them has been, and they begin to seriously consider what they want to make of their lives as they head into the future. Middle-age is often a time when questions and concerns related to meaning, direction, and wholeness (which are closely connected to spirituality and faith) arise and become prominent for people. Old goals and values may not make sense, and those dreams, desires, needs, and traits that have been repressed may come out of hiding. For women, midlife may be the first time in their adult lives that they begin to seriously contemplate their own personal needs, dreams, and desires. It may be a time to consider pursuing a vocation of their own choosing, one that is rooted in their deepest selves, but first, they may feel a need to discover or explore who they really are.

<sup>93</sup> Shellenbarger, 165.

One or more of a variety of factors may set a person on the midlife journey.

Midlife questions may arise when children move out of the house, when one realizes one cannot have children any more (due to a hysterectomy or menopause), or when one comes face-to-face with one's mortality. Sometimes the midlife experience is precipitated by the loss of a job or an increasing sense of dissatisfaction with the job one has.

Sometimes one falls into a depression for no apparent reason, but the reason is midlife.

"Confusion, disorientation, boredom, depression, disappointment in ourselves and others, and dissolution of the plans and stratagems that seemed to work before" are all common experiences of people in midlife. Paying attention to and addressing these experiences and the issues and questions connected to them can lead to greater meaning and fullness of life in one's senior years.

#### **Author's Location**

I am a white woman who was raised in a rural farming and working-class community in central Michigan. My religious formation took place in a small congregation of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), now known as the Community of Christ. After high school, I went to college and completed a bachelor's degree in elementary education. Soon after I began my undergraduate studies, I became involved in a young adult group connected with the local RLDS congregation. At the end of my sophomore year of college, the pastorate of the congregation presented me with my call to the priesthood. Over the summer, I completed the three Temple School courses required for ordination. Typically, these were ten-hour

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> James Hollis, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life* (New York: Gotham Books, 2005), 3.

courses taught by volunteers, but because of my situation that summer, I worked on them by myself, answered questions for each lesson, and sent them to a volunteer who responded to what I wrote and determined my successful completion of the courses. In the fall, a month before my twentieth birthday, I was ordained an Aaronic priest.

While I enjoyed being involved in church and studying religious texts, I decided during my undergraduate years that I was not interested in working for my denomination. At the time, most paid ministers in the RLDS Church were "appointees," and these people were usually administrators assigned to large geographical regions, so they travelled a lot, preaching and teaching in different locations almost every weekend. Once one "went under appointment," the denomination determined the positions and places in the world in which one would serve. I was not interested in that kind of life. However, my student teaching experiences had left me questioning my potential to be a good elementary or middle school teacher. As I worked as a substitute teacher and spent summers looking for a teaching job, I considered other occupations that might suit me. I contemplated becoming a college professor, but I was not certain in which area of study I would want to focus.

After I received my undergraduate degree, I was invited to participate in a series of weekend Young Adult Leadership Seminars sponsored and taught by ministers employed to serve the Michigan Region and Detroit International Stake of the RLDS Church. Most, if not all, of these ministers had taken graduate-level theological school courses. During the seminar on Christology, one of the teachers asked me, in front of the whole group, if I had considered pursuing theological or religious studies. Hesitant to

share my real thoughts and feelings publicly, I hedged and jokingly said, "Yeah, on those bad days of subbing." But this teacher did not give up. Later, he talked to me privately and encouraged me to consider taking courses in religious studies. I had been depressed because of my failure to find a teaching job, but when this minister spoke to me, I felt something open up inside of me—a light of possibility and hope. He was affirming me and encouraging me to do something that I really wanted to do. I had wanted to take some religion courses during my undergraduate program, but they would not have counted toward my degree, so I was not able to justify spending the money and time on them. As I reflected on what this minister had said, what I felt when he shared with me, and my desire to study religion, I determined that a legitimate, practical approach would be to work toward become a religious studies professor, which would mean getting first a master's degree and then a Ph.D.

Following another summer of failing to find a teaching job and the experience of having my mother suggest I do a master's degree (she did not know what kind of master's degree I was already considering), I began pursuing the idea of obtaining a theological education. At the time, my congregation happened to have a member with an M.Div. and a Ph.D. in religious studies. I went to him for advice and direction, and he gave me a list of schools to check out, telling me that if I wanted to get a job when I was done, I needed to go to a top school. I quickly figured out that I was not prepared to select a Master of Arts in Religion program, so I decided to do a Master of Divinity degree. I decided I could check out different areas of study while building my skills and expertise as a minister. I whittled the list down to three schools to which I applied. I was accepted

by all three, so I visited each one. Claremont School of Theology was the only one of them that was not located in the middle of a huge city, and it had a botanical garden next door, where I could take my daily walks and enjoy nature. I also experienced a strong sense of community while I was there, and the contemporary feel of the chapel, with its movable chairs, appealed to me as a person from a low-church tradition. These factors were strongly influential in my decision to enroll at CST.

I began my studies at CST in the fall of 2005, when I was 24. There were only a handful of young women my age who started at the same time. My youthfulness was brought to my attention one semester by a professor who greeted me two different times as I entered class with, "What are you doing here? You're too young to be here." I felt insulted, although I realized the professor was joking. His comments pointed out to me that midlife students were the dominant group at CST. Overall, though, my experience as a student at CST was positive. My New Testament courses showed me that it was valid not to believe in Jesus as a unique incarnation of God, a theological stance that I had been leaning toward since studying the gospel of Mark for one of the Young Adult Leadership Seminars. Studying process theology with David Griffin, I found that this system of thought resonated with me, and I remembered one of the Leadership Seminar teachers saying that, as someone raised in the RLDS tradition, I had been influenced by process thought more than I knew. A class in feminist preaching and liturgy introduced me to feminist and pagan spiritualities, which was additionally meaningful to me.

Nonetheless, after four years of what was the most challenging school experience of my life, I was tired of all the reading, writing, and critical thinking. Relationships and

events outside of school were also draining a lot of energy out me. At the time, there were some new possibilities for employment with my denomination, so I was hopeful that I could get a ministerial job. However, various factors prevented that from occurring. I ended up teaching at a charter elementary school in Cleveland, Ohio for almost two years, then working part-time for a public library system and as a tutor at a Sylvan Learning Center. Three years after receiving my M.Div., I felt like my life was headed nowhere, so I decided to continue pursuing my previous goal of getting a Ph.D. I applied to one doctoral program and was not accepted, so the next year, I applied to three schools. CST was the only one that accepted me. Thus, in the late summer of 2004, I journeyed back across the country to southern California and enrolled as a Ph.D. student in religious education at my alma mater. I was 33 at the time, and, in retrospect, I think I already had been engaging some of the psychological issues Jung associated with midlife.

As someone who had spent several years as a student in two of the programs at CST, I related to a lot of what my research participants shared with me. In some ways, this sense of connection was helpful, but in working on this dissertation, I have also sometimes wondered if I were not too close to, or too immersed in, the subject matter. I may have asked participants more questions if I had not been familiar with the school, its professors and staff, and its culture. More distance may have also granted me more objectivity and a better perspective from which to make interpretations.

### Overview of Chapters

In this chapter, I have provided an introduction to my research study and its nature, purposes, and goals. Definitions and explanations have been given for the terms

theological school, seminary, and midlife or middle-aged. In addition, I have shared perspectives on midlife from Jung, Erikson, and two studies of midlife women. Finally, I have located myself as the author and researcher for this dissertation and shared my own two journeys to theological school. Chapter 2 describes the research methods I used, the process of my research and the directions it took, and the participants in the study and how they were recruited. It also names limitations of the study.

Chapter 3 shares the adult life stories of the majority of the research participants. While the narratives summarize the paths of the women's adult lives, the focus is on the events, experiences, and thought processes that led them to decide to go to theological school. In Chapter 4, I analyze the stories of the participants' journeys to CST. I take a brief look at the patterns of their adult lives, and then I name and describe the four themes I found in common among their reasons for deciding to attend theological school. These themes are the experience of feeling called, pursuing the heart's desire, seeking to do something different and more meaningful, and finding that the timing was right. Following the description of these themes, I provide an analysis of them in connection to literature on midlife and women's development.

Chapter 5 considers contextual factors that influence midlife women seminarians' experiences of theological school. In this chapter, I look at participants' educational and work backgrounds and the gap between their school enrollments to consider how well prepared they may have been to meet the rigors and demands of theological education. The effect of participants' ages and location as midlife women on their experiences as students is also examined. Additional sections describe the influential factors of work,

finances, children, commuting, course loads, relationships, and spirituality in participants' lives as seminarians.

Chapter 6 focuses on women's experiences of theological school. In this chapter, I review research participants' goals in attending theological school before describing and analyzing their perspectives of and experiences with professors, courses, assignments, speaking up in class, and prejudice and bias. Next, I share the participants' reflections on how theological education has helped them grow and affected and changed their views of their religious traditions, their theologies and spiritualities, their views of themselves, and their perspectives of other people and the world. Examining this data, I then draw some conclusions about these women's epistemological locations.

I begin Chapter 7 by reviewing the characteristics of the women in my research group and the themes in their processes of deciding to go to theological school. Based on these, I make some suggestions for religious professionals who work with midlife women. Next, I examine participants' experiences of theological school as a whole, focusing on what they considered to be highlights of their time at seminary. From there, I offer a synoptic description of midlife women's theological school experiences and suggest implications of my research for graduate theological education, particularly for seminary professors. Finally, I provide suggestions for further research.

#### **CHAPTER 2**

### Qualitative Research with Midlife Women Seminarians

When I began my study of midlife women theological students, I assumed that these women had some commonalities due to their age and gender that were factors contributing to their decisions to attend seminary. Assuming these commonalities, I also assumed that the women would have similar needs and encounter similar issues and struggles in their journeys through theological education. My assumptions underlay my original research questions: "What brings midlife women to seminary? How do they experience theological education? Do theological schools address the reasons that bring these women to them? How can religious education in both seminaries and churches be more responsive to the needs and desires of midlife women, empowering them and facilitating positive transformation at this critical stage of life?"

As I proceeded through my research, my study took on the improvisational quality represented in Penny Oldfather and Jane West's metaphor of "qualitative research as jazz." Playing with this metaphor, they suggest that "as the deep structure of jazz guides the unfolding of the music, so the epistemological principles, socially constructed values, inquiry focus, and emerging findings guide the unfolding of qualitative research processes." Yet, jazz is "adaptive and is shaped by the participants," so claiming this metaphor of jazz for qualitative research invites an understanding that researchers are free to move "in response to serendipitous events and emerging understandings." The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Penny Oldfather and Jane West, "Qualitative Research as Jazz," *Educational Researcher* 23, no. 8 (1994): 22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Oldfather and West, 22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Oldfather and West, 22, 23.

structure of my values and focus remained the same during my research process, while the approach and elements of the research shifted and changed as I met and talked with midlife women students and gained new understandings and insights.

This chapter provides a description of my research design and process. It begins with an explanation of participatory action research and my attempt to implement this research methodology with midlife women students at Claremont School of Theology (CST). The second part summarizes the methodology of phenomenological research and how I have implemented that methodology for this research project. Next, I provide a demographic description of the study participants, followed by an account of my use of questionnaires and interviews to collect data. The final section of this chapter names limitations of the study.

#### Participatory Action Research

My research project was guided by the questions I sought to answer, and using interviews and questionnaires with midlife women students seemed to be the best way to uncover answers to these questions. However, as an educator, minister, and midlife woman, I wanted to do more than just interviews. I desired to do something that would be helpful for the midlife women at my school and maybe personally helpful to me. For my qualifying exam on religious education practice, I had planned a series of sessions for a hypothetical midlife women's support group based on my study of Jungian psychology and what Jungian psychotherapists had written about midlife. I considered forming such a group and implementing my lesson plans, while engaging in a process of action and reflection to gauge their success, but I realized that I had little foundation for believing

they would meet the needs of midlife women students at Claremont School of Theology.

I had to first find out what those needs were. This led me to initially choose participatory action research as a research methodology.

## Description of Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) is a qualitative research approach that seeks to involve the people being studied in all aspects of the research process with the aim of "collectively investigating reality in order to transform it." Through maximum participation in the research process, "subjects" are not treated as objects but as coresearchers. A less radical understanding of PAR defines its purpose as producing "practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives" and as contributing "through this practical knowledge to the increased well-being-economic, political, psychological, spiritual—of human persons and communities." These emphases on shared power and change for the betterment of people's lives are also found in feminist orientations to research, so PAR fit well with my feminist commitments and values.

PAR has traditionally been used with groups of people considered oppressed or marginalized in some way. One of the sources for the epistemology and practice of PAR is Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. For some researchers, PAR is a process of critical pedagogy, with perhaps more emphasis on the social action component than what is found in Freire's works. Freire focused on conscientization, the process of becoming

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Patricia Maguire, *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach* (Amherst, MA: Center for International Education, School of Education, University of Massachusetts, 1987), 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, "Introduction," in *The Sage Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, ed. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 4.

critically conscious about one's reality. Thus, the first step in his pedagogical approach was to help oppressed people see their situation through new lenses. He would show them pictures that represented their daily lives and communities and pose questions about these pictures. He called this process "problem posing." It was designed to help people identify ways in which their current economic, political, and social situations were problematic or unjust and in need of change. Through problem posing and analysis came conscientization. As people became aware of the injustices of their lives, energy would gather around particular concerns or "generative themes." The themes were the issues that the group would address through social action. Similarly, PAR generally involves a cyclical process of reflection and action. The reflection component involves social analysis or investigation of the current reality and reflection on actions that may be in process or have been carried out by the co-researchers.

Freire challenged the dichotomy between the roles of teachers and students. He wanted educators to see themselves as people who learned from their students, and he wanted students to be perceived as teachers. Thus, educators were not the ones with all the knowledge who "deposited" this knowledge into learners, and students were not empty banks waiting for these "deposits." Likewise, PAR seeks to do away with the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the researched. All are coresearchers working together to identify issues and address them. As Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury explain, "Researching with people means that they are engaged as full persons, and the exploration is based directly on their understanding of their own actions

and experience, rather than filtered through an outsider's perspective." Knowledge is produced corporately, rather than being the result of research conducted by an academic who then becomes the holder and disseminator of this knowledge.

As I considered using PAR as a research methodology for my study, I questioned whether midlife women attending theological school could be considered "oppressed" or "marginalized." I did not perceive them to be particularly disadvantaged as a group, but I did think that by nature of their developmental stage of life, they might have some common struggles or issues that could be named and addressed, whether they related to school or not. I was assuming that these issues or needs were not currently being addressed in their lives, particularly as they attended theological school. In addition, I knew that being a student at CST had been transformative and empowering for some women, and I wanted to find ways for more women to experience empowerment and transformative learning. Yet, since I did not know the women in my potential sample very well, if at all, I knew it would be misguided of me to assume I knew what their particular struggles and needs were and then attempt to facilitate an educational program or growth group with them. Participatory research appealed to me because it was an approach that would engage the women themselves in identifying problems and challenges and then working together to create a plan that would address these. My role would be to guide the process and provide resources as they were needed for the progress of the process.

In *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach*, Patricia Maguire describes the feminist participatory action research she carried out with a group of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Reason and Bradbury, 9.

women who were former clients of a service for battered families. She began by interviewing battered women and asking them to "discuss the problems they faced in their everyday lives since leaving the shelter and question why those problems existed and what could be done about them." She closed the interviews by asking if the interviewees would be interested in forming a support group with other battered women to look into the problems they had identified and consider what they might be able to do about them. Then Maguire worked with the women who were interested to form a support group, and they identified the problems they wanted to address. Maguire began her research with interviews because there was not an already identifiable, cohesive, or formal group of battered women in the geographic area where she wanted to do her research.

Like Maguire, I wanted to do research with a particular demographic that did not have a sense of cohesion as a group. However, because of the common theological school environment, which was a small community itself, I did not think community-building among midlife women at CST would be difficult. Also, since I was trying to do this research within the space of one semester, I did not have time to conduct interviews; transcribe, analyze, and interpret them; and then create a process or program to meet the women's needs and desires. I trusted that the women themselves, working together, could identify problems, needs, issues, or struggles to address through a PAR process. So I began by trying to have PAR meetings with interested midlife women students at CST. I planned to do interviews and questionnaires in order to fully answer all of my research questions, but I also thought that the content of these questionnaires and interviews could

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Maguire, 129.

serve as additional input to the PAR group's discussions and work.

PAR is inherently an evolving and unpredictable research approach. Each step influences what the following steps will be and how they will be carried out, because the researcher is involving others as equal participants in the research process. As a person who likes structure and predictability, I struggled to keep myself open to the PAR process I was seeking to implement. The following is a description of how the process unfolded and what I learned.

#### The PAR Process

I began recruiting participants for my study by passing around a sign-up sheet in the Fall 2009 "Educational Ministry of the Church" class, for which I was a teaching assistant and which was a required course for M.Div. students at CST. I asked the midlife women who signed the sheet to check if they would be interested in being interviewed and if they would be interested in a support/spiritual growth group. This elicited seven potential participants for my study. At the beginning of the Spring 2010 semester, I sent an email requesting these women to help me determine a good meeting time for what I had decided would be a PAR group, rather than a support group. The initial indication that my plan to have weekly meetings was not going to work came with the first response I received to my email message:

I do not envy you trying to find a meeting time for all of us!!!! My best time would be Wednesday afternoon, from 11-5. I can also come up on Friday, depending on how many meetings you will be having. Good luck, [Momma G]<sup>8</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> This is a pseudonym. All the participants were invited to select their own pseudonyms for use in this dissertation. Due to the revealing nature of the stories in Chapter 3, I gave participants the option of having a second pseudonym for use in sections of the dissertation unrelated to these stories. A few women took me up on this offer.

Momma G had been a student at CST for four and a half years, so she knew what she was talking about in her implied warning that I was going to have difficulty getting midlife women together. No more than three women attended any of the meetings that were held, and for one meeting that I scheduled, no one came. As was noted at the first PAR meeting, many midlife women students are struggling to negotiate and balance their family, work, and school commitments. One more thing on their plate may have been too much of an extra burden. So, despite the interest expressed by several women in the PAR group, they just did not have the time, especially while they were on campus, to engage in a full-fledged PAR process. Thus, one issue that was uncovered in terms of midlife CST women's lives was that they were too busy to work together to possibly improve their lives as students.

While I realized from the outset that it would be difficult to get any group of students together toward the end of the semester, I thought that if we could get started at the beginning of the semester, we could build some momentum to carry us through to the end. However, I was not able to get permission to proceed with my research as soon as I had planned, so it was about three weeks into the semester when I sent my recruiting email to the entire CST student body and posted signs around campus with essentially the same content as the email. The subject heading for the email was, "CST women between 35 and 64 years old: please read." In the message, I explained my research project and invited midlife women to participate in a PAR group and volunteer to be interviewed or fill out a questionnaire. I also included a list of "some signs that you might be a midlife

woman." I received several email responses expressing interest in my research project and notes about potential or actual conflicts with meeting times.

The second issue that arose with using the PAR approach with midlife women was that, for some of the participants, problematizing their situation as female midlife seminary students seemed negative, unnecessary, or irrelevant. In other words, they did not want to focus on "issues" or "problems," because, in general, seminary was a positive, exciting experience for them. It is also possible that they did not perceive any problems related to their age and gender in the context of theological education. They experienced struggles, but these were not considered unusual or in need of special attention. I began to wonder if focusing on "issues" and "problems" was a problem in itself as I reflected on a question that was asked at the end of the initial PAR meeting. I had posed the following questions and a conversation had ensued: "What do you think of when you think of midlife women coming to theological school for the first time? This could be you or women like you. What themes, issues, problems, hopes, etc. come to mind?" As she was leaving, LD asked, "Are we going to look at our strengths at all, what we bring?"<sup>10</sup> The expression on her face as she asked this was one of concern (or so it seemed to me), and it led me to reflect on the deeper meaning of what she had said. A few days after this first meeting, I sent an email to the women who had expressed interest in the group, providing a summary of the sharing that had taken place during the meeting, along with ideas and plans for future meeting times. I included LD's question and my reflections on it and invited the recipients to respond:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The body of the message can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The women who attended group meetings signed consent forms giving me permission to use the content of our discussions in my dissertation. See Appendix B.

It occurred to me, in reflecting on this question, that maybe one "issue" or "problem" is that people talk about and focus on midlife women's "problems" and "issues" or on midlife itself as a "problem," instead of focusing on midlife women's strengths and contributions and possibilities. What do you think? . . . . Also, what are the strengths you bring to the CST community? What would you like to be able to contribute?

The first woman who responded to this email referred back to her reply to my recruiting email and my list of "some signs that you might be a midlife woman." This list of "signs" was based on my study of Jungian psychology and the works of Jungian psychotherapists writing about midlife. It was an attempt to give something of a definition of midlife, since several people had asked me what I meant by the term. P<sup>11</sup> had responded to that email with the following: "I would be glad to fill out your questionnaire, and I fit the criterion age-wise, but I definitely don't fall into any of your 'thoughts about midlife' categories. What do you think?" Then, in response to my email following the first PAR meeting, P shared the following:

Thank you for the follow-up. The meeting sounded very successful.

I was especially interested in the comments about looking at the positive and at our strengths, as that is exactly what was on my mind when I responded to your first e-mail. I thought that all of your "signs of midlife womanhood" were negative and did not describe me at all, hence my initial response to you.

Please keep me posted on meetings because I am still interested.

Nancy, a second-semester M.Div. student, responded to my first PAR meeting summary with the following thoughts about being a midlife seminary student:

I am enthusiastic about your project and definitely want to participate. And although I wasn't at the first meeting, my response to your prior email explaining your project is reflected in a comment in this email, which is about the focus on mid-life women's problems. Interestingly, earlier in my life I might have wanted to focus on "problems." But now I feel a freedom to explore life—like

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> This woman never attended any of the meetings, and she did not fill out a questionnaire or do an interview with me. However, she gave me permission to include her email messages here and to use "P" as her pseudonym.

I'm 18 or 20 again, but with much more confidence. I am concerned about how I'm going to pull this off financially and hope that when I graduate I can find a job that will meet my mortgage and loan payments and allow me a small splurge at Whole Foods a couple of times a year instead of always searching out bargains at Trader Joe's and Food 4 Less . . . .

I was stressed beyond measure last semester because I wasn't sure how I would do in an academic setting after a 30-year hiatus. Plus, our work load was completely unreasonable. However, the professors heard us, I think they actually looked at the ridiculous number of pages they were asking us to write, and some scaled back on their final requirements. I survived and did well—so now I know I can do this. This semester, so far, has been more forgiving in terms of work load, plus I've mastered organizing my time well enough to not be on the edge of exhaustion most of the time.

For me, it's amazing and thrilling to be recreating myself at 55 (56 next month). Plus there is a wonderful thing about being in the presence of people who are motivated by call over ego. You don't see that in the corporate world.

So all of this is to say that you might find, that as a group, we are far more resilient, resourceful, and fearless than people might imagine. As for me, in the last 5-10 years I've lived through breast cancer and lost a sister to ovarian cancer. School is a challenge, but nothing like the challenges life throws in your path.

Looking forward to exploring with you.

This message clearly reveals that, despite struggles and concerns related to being a midlife seminary student, this is not where this particular woman wants to place a lot of focus. In interviews and discussions, other women expressed sentiments similar to Nancy's—that being able to engage in this kind of study at this point in their lives is exciting and a blessing. However, I was not sure what to do with this perspective, since it did not fit with the purposes of participatory action research. If there were not any pressing problems or issues to resolve, then an action component was not necessary or relevant.

For the second PAR group meeting, I proposed that we could continue talking about what brings midlife women to theological school, the challenges and struggles of going to school at CST, and what it means to be a midlife woman at CST. I suggested

that

one way to frame this discussion is to discuss the expectations you had when you came to CST and the disappointments and struggles you have encountered along the way. Also, what are the strengths you bring to the CST community? What would you like to be able to contribute?

One person (Pauline) showed up for this meeting, and she was only able to stay for about half an hour, but we were able to touch on these questions a little bit.

Following this second meeting, I sent another email with several paragraphs. In the first paragraph, I asked about changing meeting times or having two of them. The second paragraph summarized the discussion Pauline and I had had during our short meeting. Since I was getting the feeling that the women were not going to identify a problem or issue to work on, I thought I would try sharing information with them that might spark some reflection, discussion, and sharing. I attached a document to the email that summarized psychotherapist Maureen Murdock's model of the "heroine's journey." In the third paragraph of my email message, I described this model as "one approach to or perspective on adult women's development" and invited the women to respond to it and whether they saw themselves in the developmental journey described. Three lines of thinking led me to introduce Murdock's work in this email. One was that the women might connect with it and find it a helpful perspective or framework for thinking about their lives. The second was that it might raise some needs or struggles they had. The third was that I would get input on how or whether this theory could be applied to the women I was studying.

In the fourth paragraph of this email, I returned to the questions I had posed for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Maureen Murdock, The Heroine's Journey (Boston: Shambhala, 1990).

the second meeting and added the following: "What would you like professors to know about you? If we turned these meetings into a support group, what would that look like? What would you find helpful?" The first question was designed to elicit possible struggles or issues related to classes or thoughts about what midlife women bring to the seminary classroom. The next two questions returned to the idea of having a support group, since several women had expressed interest in participating in such a group. Considering this implied need for coming together with other midlife women students, I thought that one option would be to jump to the "action" aspect of participatory action research and start a support group. However, I still did not know what people wanted or why they were interested in a support group.

In retrospect, I think that my long, expository emails were too much for the women to read and process. It might have been better if I had written emails with lists of bulleted or bolded items. As it was, I only received one response to this email over the next four days, and it was from LD: "Vicki—I think this is more than I have time for right now. I'm sorry." So, I decided to try scheduling two meeting times for the next week, since at least one woman had told me that Tuesdays were a better time for her. I kept the original Wednesday time, which fell between the chapel service and the beginning of afternoon classes, and added a Tuesday time. The Tuesday time was 4:15, which gave the women time after their afternoon classes to go to the "Deans' Tea" and get snacks and socialize for a bit. Evening classes at CST did not start until 6:30. I sent out a short email giving the two times, the location, and a two-sentence version of my discussion questions and topics.

Two women came to each of the meeting times, and we spent some time discussing Murdock's model of the "heroine's journey" in relation to the women's lives. These four women did not seem to make any significant personal connections with the model, so I decided it was not helpful for my research project. What I found significant were the parting comments from the two women who attended the first meeting that week: they said that they were meeting with me because they wanted to help me with my dissertation. While I was grateful that the women wanted to help me, I also felt defeated. The idea of PAR was to help them improve their lives as students, not to help me get my Ph.D. If they were not interested in PAR and did not have the time for it, then, I realized, I needed a new research methodology.

However, I was still hearing women express interest in meeting for sharing and discussion, so I took one woman's suggestion and started scheduling biweekly meetings. No one showed up for the next meeting I scheduled, but a couple women communicated with me about meeting two weeks later, so I set up another meeting. By this time, interviews and casual conversations had surfaced a couple specific "issues" for midlife women students. The first had to do with reading assignments: how to read the assigned materials for maximum comprehension and how to read and grasp their contents quickly. Therefore, I suggested, again via email, that participants could bring to the next meeting

lifetime, I do not have the data to draw parallels between her work and the lives of the other women who participated in my study. In addition, while Murdock refers to the concepts of Jungian individuation, she does not identify ages with the stages of her "heroine's journey." Rather, she sees it as a cyclical or spiraling process, "a continuous cycle of development, growth, and learning," and a "person may be at several stages of the journey at one time" (Murdock, 4). Therefore, it would be difficult to make specific connections between her model and specific midlife women and why they chose to attend theological school.

"materials you find hard to read, syllabi, and assignment sheets, so we can address how to read specific materials for particular teachers and assignments." The second struggle I had heard expressed was dealing with the loneliness of being a midlife woman seminarian. This connected back with the idea of having a support group, so I suggested that participants could also bring to the meeting "concerns and struggles and stories to share," so we could "support one another." In addition, I admitted that this generative theme of loneliness had "struck a chord with me" and that,

as I thought about this dissertation project, I had hoped to find women who might share some of my experiences of going through this phase of life I'm in, who might also resonate with some of the things I've been reading about midlife psychological development.

Thus, I revealed some of my personal motivation and hope for my research project, making myself more transparent to the participants.

Three women came to the study skills meeting; one of them had not attended any previous meetings. I shared some pointers on how to read for comprehension and how to speed read. This led into a discussion about reading and studying for different classes and then some conversation about being midlife women students and the struggles that come with that. Encouraged by this meeting, I planned for another one in two weeks. When I saw that this meeting time conflicted with the grand opening of a new "After Hours Student Lounge," I altered my plan. The reason for this was that one of the women I had interviewed had complained about the lack of places for commuter students to study when the library was closed. I thought that it might be helpful to encourage the women participating in my study—most of whom were commuters—to check out this new space

to which they would have 24-hour access. <sup>14</sup> So, I suggested that we meet at the Deans' Tea and then decide if we wanted to go to the new Lounge and have some sharing and discussion there.

At the Deans' Tea, I observed the relationships some midlife women already had with one another. I felt a bit like an intruder, or at least an outsider, so instead of trying to take leadership and create a more structured or directed discussion, I decided to just be another midlife woman engaged in casual conversation. This allowed me to gain more of a sense of who some of the participants in my study were and how they interacted with one another. I also gained a glimpse into how different personalities and life backgrounds can affect people's perceptions of their experiences, including their encounters with others. One of the Latino midlife women had an appointment with a staff member during the conversational time at the Deans' Tea. Before going to the appointment, she expressed her fear of this particular staff person. When she came back, her answer to the question, "How did it go?" was, "She didn't eat me." This brought up other women's perspectives regarding the staff member. A white woman said that it did not bother her how this staff person treated her, plus, she knew part of her life story and had some respect for her. A black woman shared a conversation she had had with this person (who is also black) and how she had found her unhelpful and unsupportive. These women were all about the same age (53-56), and the treatment they had received from this staff person was basically the same, regardless of race or ethnicity, but their responses varied. One woman felt intimidated, one was not inclined to take things personally, and another was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> The After Hours Study Lounge was a former on-campus apartment that was converted into a study space with a coded lock, so only students with the code had access to it.

first discouraged, then disgruntled.

Some of the midlife women went to the Study Lounge while I was talking with a couple other women, and my conversation partners and I went to the Lounge later. My decision to merge the midlife women's group meeting with the Deans' Tea and the Study Lounge's grand opening may have been helpful to the women who met that day. Two of these women later shared with me that they had made use of the Lounge. Interestingly, these were women who lived on campus.

In the email I sent out suggesting that we meet at the Deans' Tea, I also included some quotes from Lisa Hamilton's book, *Wisdom from the Middle Ages for Middle-Aged Women*. I thought they might be insightful, even if they did not elicit any responses. I began by stating that the following was a "new definition of midlife": "Middle age is when you start hearing your own voice at least as loudly as you hear those of others." To explicate this, I added,

Most of us start hearing whispers of our own voice somewhere in our forties, and a few of us find our voices' volume steadily increasing. But once your own voice has your attention, it's too interesting and too wise and too unique to ignore. <sup>16</sup>

I also included Hamilton's theological thoughts regarding this midlife development: "As you start to hear your own voice more clearly, you may find yourself hearing God's more clearly as well." I then asked the women, "What do you think? Does this resonate with you and your experience?" These are the responses I received: "Yes, you have touched my heart with this statement—yes, it is true." "Great quotes! Thanks!" "Each email you

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Lisa B. Hamilton, Wisdom from the Middle Ages for Middle-Aged Women (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2007), 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Hamilton, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Hamilton, 4-5.

send gives me clarity to my own CST journey. Thank-you for that! . . . . You are expanding my summer reading intention!"

At this point, the end of the semester was fast approaching. I decided that it would be unwise to schedule more meetings, since I might need those meeting times for doing interviews with commuter students who were only on campus one to three days a week. Thus, I concluded the PAR/discussion group process with a final email, which I sent at the beginning of the last week of classes before exam week. In the email, I included a few inspirational quotes from Hamilton's book, a couple website links to information on how to skim and speed read, and a final request for interviews. The quotes and the website references elicited the following words of gratitude: "Thank you for the inspirational words. I hope all goes well with you and your research project." "Thanks for the inspiration!" "Thanks for the inspiration—[I] will look at the links, they will improve my ability to read in graduate school."

While it may seem at first glance that there was not an action component to this process of (attempted) PAR, the conversations I had with midlife women during meeting times and on other occasions contributed to my thinking and understanding and to this dissertation. This dissertation will, I hope, provide insights that lead to changes in theological schools, seminary courses, and maybe even churches. In addition, the women who participated in this study through group meetings, questionnaires, interviews, or just reading my emails had opportunities to reflect on their lives and experiences in ways that may have caused inner shifts, if not outward changes. Therefore, action—maybe even transformative action—took place, even if it was not a concerted, organized effort to

change a particular situation or structure. The participants in the study have also had the opportunity to participate in the action of dissertation writing by providing feedback on drafts of each chapter. In this way, they have been able to ensure that they and their experiences are not greatly misrepresented or misinterpreted.

## Phenomenological Research

While I did not begin my study with an understanding that I was engaging in phenomenological research, my research questions pointed me in that direction. <sup>18</sup> The PAR project was really peripheral to the central concern of my research, which was to answer the questions, "Why do midlife women choose to attend theological school?" and, "How do midlife women experience theological education?" For the first question, I wanted to find common factors in midlife women's processes of deciding to go to seminary and determine if those factors had any relationship to their stage of life. With the second question, I hoped to discover commonalities in midlife women's experiences of theological school that would help seminaries better serve this group of students. Since "phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon," this methodology coincides with the descriptive aims of my

<sup>18</sup> Thus I resonate with what Max van Manen says in his book on hermeneutic phenomenology: "A research method is only a way of investigating certain kinds of questions. The questions themselves and the way one understands the questions are the important starting points, not the method as such. But of course it is true as well that the way in which one articulates certain questions has something to do with the research method that one tends to identify with. So there exists a certain dialectic between question and method. . . . [T]he method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator." Max van Manen, Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 1-2.

research. <sup>19</sup> Before considering further the ways in which my study is phenomenological research, I will introduce what it is.

## Description of Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological research has a strong philosophical foundation. The technical meaning of the term "phenomenology" is attributed to Hegel, for whom the term "referred to knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience." Phenomenologists begin with descriptions of phenomena and strive to understand them in "their perceived immediacy," rather than trying to explain, analyze, or interpret them. This approach to research is based on the writings of the German mathematician, Edmund Husserl. Husserl was "concerned with the experiential underpinnings of knowledge." He held that knowledge is based on experience and consciousness of phenomena. Thus, phenomena are experienced, but we can only know them by intentionally directing our consciousness toward them. Through intentionality, a thing becomes an object in consciousness. This object is a construction based on perception; it is what a person knows and not the actual thing. Husserl "distinguished between external perception, which relates only to physical phenomena, and internal perceptions of mental

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ronald S. Valle and Mark King, "An Introduction to Existential-Phenomenological Thought in Psychology," in *Existential-Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology*, ed. Ronald S. Valle and Mark King (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, "Interpretive Practice and Social Action," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 484.

phenomena."<sup>23</sup> Since phenomena include things that are strictly mental, it is possible that the references of our perceptions do not actually exist. This, however, does not make a difference to phenomenology.<sup>24</sup> Phenomenology regards perception "as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted."<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is concerned with people's experiences as they are perceived by them.

Since individuals' experiences are the data of phenomenology, phenomenological research usually seeks to elicit people's stories through the method of long interviews. Interviewees are asked to provide full descriptions of their experiences of a phenomena. For his transcendental phenomenological research process, Clark Moustakas distinguishes between two types of descriptions: textural and structural. The textural description is what a participant experienced—"thoughts, feelings, examples, ideas, [and] situations that portray what comprises an experience."26 The structural description includes what surrounds the experience and contributes to it—the underlying conditions, context, and precipitating factors. Researchers using this approach develop textural and structural descriptions of the focal phenomena for each participant and for the research group as a whole.

Yet, phenomenological research is not concerned merely with descriptions of experiences or phenomena. In his work, Husserl sought to discover the meanings or essences of experiential knowledge, which are hidden from consciousness, but are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Moustakas, 50.

Moustakas, 50. Moustakas, 52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Moustakas, 47.

embedded in acts of perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering, and judging.<sup>27</sup> Because they are embedded, meanings have to be drawn out from experiences; they cannot be assumed. Description provides the data for discerning meaning, since meaning is to be found in what is presented to consciousness. Intuition and reflection are the processes by which one comes to understand the meanings or essences of phenomena. Intuition is an inborn ability to present to consciousness the nature of what is given. It is "the beginning place in deriving knowledge of human experience."<sup>28</sup> Through an intuitive-reflective process, one can come to know the essence of a phenomena, which is the aim of phenomenological research.

According to Moustakas, "The essences of experience are the invariant meanings." For Max van Manen, who wrote about hermeneutical phenomenology, "essence" is what the true nature of a thing is; it is that which "makes a thing what it is (and without which it would not be what it is)." In terms of phenomenological research, "The essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon." In other words, a phenomenologist studies particular instances of a phenomenon in order to discover and then describe their essential nature and internal meaning structure. This assumes that a phenomena or experience has the same characteristics, form, or structure that can be recognized in various instances or situations, despite the different ways it may appear and the different perspectives and life

<sup>27</sup> Moustakas, 69.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Moustakas, 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Moustakas, 51.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> van Manen, 177.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> van Manen, 10.

situations influencing its perception. Discussing existential phenomenology, Ronald Valle and Mark King write, "Regardless of which of the phenomenon's particular variations is revealed at any given time, this phenomenon is seen as having the same essential meaning when it is perceived over time in many different situations." 32

In transcendental phenomenology, before engaging in a reflective process to discern the essence of a phenomena, one must bracket one's preconceptions and presuppositions and clear a space within oneself, so one can look with fresh eyes at what is being observed. While one can never be fully free of assumptions, the effort is made to reach such a state and to be open to receive, as is, whatever presents itself to consciousness. Thus, when a researcher has bracketed her or his own judgments, biases, and preconceived ideas, everything is perceived as if for the first time, so a phenomena can be described as it is, in its totality, from the perspective of the researcher's open self.

Hermeneutical phenomenology, drawing on the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, refutes the idea that preconceptions can be bracketed. "In rejecting the possibility of such objectivity or neutrality, Gadamer presents a perspective that assumes our pre-understandings or prejudices to be necessary in order for us to make sense of the world." People's pre-understandings and knowledge derived from previous experiences provide the foundation for being open to and understanding new experiences. Thus, it is more important to phenomenological research to be aware of our "historical situatedness and constantly reflect on the ways in which this situatedness influences the way that we

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Valle and King, 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 111.

interpret our world," than it is to attempt to bracket preconceptions. <sup>34</sup> Hermeneutical phenomenology recognizes that phenomena are always interpreted based on the contextuality of those who experience them and of researchers who seek to describe others' experiences of a phenomena. One cannot discern the essence of a phenomena without interpretation based on the assumptions one brings to the data.

Since phenomenology as a methodology seeks to be open to understanding the experiences of others in order to discern the meanings inherent in the experiences, it "tries to ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research project." In other words, it does not have a set research method. To have a set research method would limit researchers to the perspectives enforced upon them by that method. In addition, "the particular questions that emerge from within the plausibility structures of the method will allow the user to access only a limited amount of knowledge, that is, only the amount of knowledge that the method's questions will provide."

Still, there are particular activities that characterize phenomenological research.

Once a researcher has collected several persons' accounts of their experiences of a phenomena, the researcher seeks to determine what these experiences meant to each of the persons. From the perspective of hermeneutical phenomenology, this is accomplished through empathically opening oneself to the experiences of the research participants and respectfully dialoguing with their descriptions of those experiences. This dialogue is a process of thoughtful reflection that aims to look behind the facticity of an experience to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Swinton and Mowat, 111.

<sup>35</sup> van Manen, 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Swinton and Mowat, 110.

uncover what it is that gives the experience "its special significance," in other words, what its nature is.<sup>37</sup> To discover the nature, essence, or meaning of an experience, phenomenologists analyze persons' accounts in order to uncover the themes that are present within them. These themes are the structures that constitute an experience.<sup>38</sup> They are interpretive products of the researcher's dialogical and reflective work with the texts of research participants' accounts. Themes help researchers get at the meanings people have derived from their experiences, how they have made sense of them. "A good theme formulation somehow seems to touch the core of the notion we are trying to understand."<sup>39</sup>

In hermeneutical phenomenology, there is an emphasis on moving from whole to part and back to the whole in the research process. It is important not to get lost in the details and forget what one is trying to do. Are the parts, the details, contributing to the formation of a whole picture that reveals the meanings and essences of an experience? To aid in answering this question, a researcher consults with participants, and both participants and the researcher "weigh the appropriateness of each theme by asking: 'Is this what the experience is really like?" Once it is determined that the themes name essential qualities of the phenomenon, the researcher can construct a narrative that synthesizes the themes of the various participants' accounts into a description of the essence of the phenomenon. According to van Manen, "The essence or nature of an experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or

<sup>37</sup> van Manen, 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> van Manen, 79.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> van Manen, 88.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> van Manen, 99.

shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner."41

## This Study as Phenomenological Research

As I implied previously, my research project includes the study of two phenomena: midlife women deciding to attend theological school and their experiences of being students at such a school. To gain an understanding of the first phenomenon, my questionnaire posed the following questions: "Why did you choose to attend a theological school (CST) or pursue a theological degree at this time in your life? Why now and not earlier?" To provide context for each person's answers to these questions, I first asked them to "sketch out the path or major events of your adult life." In interviews, this request generally led women into telling their stories of how they came to seminary. If it did not, I asked them to share these stories or to tell me why they decided to attend theological school, rather than posing the questions I had written on my questionnaire, which also served as my interview guide. Initial responses to these questions showed me that I needed to ask participants to describe in detail their experiences of being "called," that is, to share what those experiences were like. In this way, I gathered various descriptions of midlife women's experiences with the phenomenon of deciding to attend theological school.

I began my phenomenological reflection and analysis process by extracting from what the participants shared with me the elements that seemed to be the significant aspects of their journeys to seminary. Using the women's own words as much as possible, I summarized each participant's adult life story up to the point of beginning

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> van Manen, 10.

claremont (ETSC). Over half of the participants' individual narratives are provided in Chapter 3. These are included in order to honor the integrity of each woman's story and the ways in which it is different from others' stories. For the sake of space, I often had to leave out details that were shared, but I sought to include everything that was crucial to understanding why a particular woman decided to attend theological school. By also including the major events of each woman's adult life, I have provided some context for her story. Since context, or historical situatedness, affects how people interpret and name their experiences, it is important to have an understanding of participants' backgrounds before embarking on the task of trying to determine the themes or structures of participants' experiences. In other words, knowing some of the factors that may influence a person's interpretations of an experience can help a researcher see more clearly what the essential themes of that experience are and how they are shaped by context.

Studying the summaries I had created of each participant's journey to CST or ETSC, I sought out commonalities between these stories and categorized the common elements according to "themes." However, as I reflected further on the purpose of phenomenological research, I realized that I had become too preoccupied with details, and I had failed to focus on the essential nature of each woman's decision-making process. Some of my themes pointed to the structures of participants' experiences of deciding to go to seminary, while others were merely contextual details surrounding the focal points of the experiences. I returned to the women's narratives, thus moving from part back to whole, and as I read them, I looked for the most meaningful elements in each

woman's journey to seminary. I then rewrote Chapter 4 to emphasize the common themes I found. Synthesizing these themes, I composed a description of what seemed to be the essential nature of midlife women's decision-making journeys to theological school.

To understand the phenomenon of midlife women's experiences of theological school, I began by distinguishing various aspects of the theological school experience and asking questions about those, such as classes, professors, assignments, and effects on personal perspectives regarding self, others, and one's faith tradition. I also asked the participants questions about contextual factors that might influence their seminary experiences: family and community support, relationships, outside demands on time and attention, and spiritual life and practices. Between the questions I asked and the answers I received, I formed several areas of analysis. Within each area, I looked for common themes. At the same time, I honored different experiences and perspectives by including them. In some cases, such as the area of prejudice or bias, it would have been unjust and unrepresentative to exclude the varied individual experiences, even if there were a common theme among the majority of participants. While a common theme was not evident in each area of analysis, there were some themes that emerged across areas as I looked at participants' experiences of seminary as a whole. From these, I developed a composite picture of midlife women's experiences of being theological school students.

As discussed earlier, it is impossible to fully bracket one's biases, assumptions, and preconceptions. To every aspect of this research project I brought with me my own understandings and perspectives based on my experiences and my knowledge of relevant literature. These influenced the data I collected and my interpretations of that data.

However, I was also challenged by what participants said and wrote to rethink and reconsider some of my preconceptions and biased approaches. As I interviewed women, I strove to listen with an open mind and empathically, deeply, and sensitively to what they shared with me. This in-person interview experience (plus, in many cases, other experiences of associating with the participants) provided me with understandings of who the women were and how they approached their experiences that helped me to discern the themes and meanings behind their words. There were four women I never met, although I talked to one on the phone, so I was unable to get this holistic sense of their personalities, but I did the best I could to read and listen to their words with empathy and intuition. My experiences as a student at CST and as a professor for ETSC may have been advantageous in helping me to understand my research participants and the meanings behind what they shared. At the same time, being an insider may have skewed my research results, because I may have made assumptions or jumped to conclusions based on my own experiences, or I may not have really understood someone and her experience because I did not share it.

According to Moustakas, phenomenological research should center on a topic that has "both social meaning and personal significance." Studying midlife women at CST had personal meaning for me because I had been both an M.Div. and a Ph.D. student at CST, and I considered myself to be in midlife. I wondered if there were similarities between my experience of being a midlife student and the experiences of other women students around my age or older. My research project has social significance because midlife women are a large demographic at theological schools. This study of a sample of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Moustakas, 104.

this group can contribute to professors' and administrators' understandings of a substantial number of the students attending their schools. What these participants had to say about their experiences of theological education may challenge seminaries and theological professors to reconsider ways they operate and how they design and teach their courses. In addition, an examination of the reasons why women decide to attend seminary and what they want from theological education may have implications for religious communities and their practices of spiritual care, education, and leadership development.

## Researching Relevant Academic Literature

While phenomenological research generally concludes with a description of the essence of a phenomenon, this dissertation goes a step further and places my findings in dialogue with academic literature related to the areas covered by my research. I began with literature that was familiar to me and which I found through searches of electronic databases, library catalogs, and Amazon.com. I scanned library shelves near specific books I was looking for and found additional resources that way. When I came across references in literature I was reading to resources that sounded like they might be applicable to my work, I obtained those sources. I even did a Google search of the internet for "midlife adults graduate school" and found a helpful, but brief, article through that search. In general, I limited my sources to literature written in 1990 or later, because I determined that literature about midlife women or female students written before then would have little relevance to or connection with the women in my study due to generational differences.

To provide insight into the themes of why my research participants decided to attend theological school, I drew on Carl Jung and other Jungian authors for a psychoanalytic perspective. Researchers who have studied midlife adults, particularly middle-aged women (like Apter and Shellenbarger), provided additional insights and points of comparison with the women in my study. A few sources that I found mentioned reasons why midlife adults decide to pursue undergraduate or graduate degrees, so these were also useful.

In examining contextual influences on women's experiences of theological education, I drew heavily from essays in four volumes on midlife adults, one of which was focused on the Baby Boomer generation. I focused on sources that described cognitive or intellectual functioning and social relationships in midlife. My search for literature describing midlife women's spirituality turned up little that connected with my study, so I pulled from sources that were descriptive of women's spirituality in general. Other literature on midlife women and development also contributed points of comparison.

In seeking out dialogue partners for my findings on midlife women's experiences of theological education, I had difficulty finding relevant literature. Adult education literature tends to focus on pedagogy (or andragogy) and curriculum. That which is about midlife students usually examines programs and experiences at the undergraduate level or in non-higher education contexts, such as the workplace. It is difficult to find texts, especially ones that are not dissertations, that discuss midlife adults in general as learners or describe their experiences in graduate education. Similarly, theological education

literature tends to focus on pedagogy, curriculum, and theories of theological education, rather than the experiences of students. There is some literature about women's experiences as clergy and how well seminaries prepare people for ministry, but these do not focus on women's experiences as seminarians. Thus, I drew extensively from two volumes of essays that provided the most connections with my study: *Women as Learners* and *Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts*.

## **Participants**

At the time I recruited and interviewed the participants in this study, I was not only a student at Claremont School of Theology, I was living on the school's campus. Thus, it was convenient for me to draw upon the CST student body for participants in my study. I anticipated that I could get a significant sample size just from this school, not only because there were a lot of midlife women attending CST, but because many of them knew me. Therefore, I limited my recruitment to the CST student body and campus. As described previously, I gained an initial list of potential participants through a class for which I was a teaching assistant, and I sent out emails to the CST student body and posted signs around campus to recruit volunteers. I also gained a few participants through personal contacts.

According to Carl Jung, midlife may begin when people are in their mid-thirties.<sup>43</sup> Some people may never enter this developmental stage of life as Jung describes it, or they may experience it in their fifties or sixties. This is especially true today, since many people live well beyond the age of 60. As I began researching the numbers of midlife women attending theological schools, I found that the ATS data on total enrollment by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Jung, "Stages of Life," 395.

age, gender, and degree program used the following age groupings: under 22, 22-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-49, 50-64, and 65 and over. When I asked CST's registrar for enrollment data that would tell me how many women were in different age groups, she gave me copies of the forms that she had sent to ATS that had the same age breakdowns. Thus, based on my understanding of the developmental age range for midlife and the statistical data I was able to access, I decided to recruit women for my study who were between the ages of 35 and 64.

The youngest participant in my study turned out to be a 34-year-old Korean woman. There are two reasons why she became one of my interviewees. One was that I made a deliberate effort to recruit Asian women. There are a lot of Asian students at CST, and I wanted to be sure they were represented in this study. The second reason involved, I believe, a miscommunication related to the different way in which Koreans calculate ages. Within the Korean system, this woman was probably 35 (or even 36). However, when I calculated her age based on the birthdate she gave me, I discovered she was really 34. Since she had just completed her master's degree, this also meant that, of the women in my sample, she started her degree at the youngest age. Only one other woman in my study began her degree before she was 35, and this was one of the other Asian women. I decided to keep them as part of my study group, partly because they provide a younger, possibly pre-midlife perspective, and partly because I wanted to avoid having any participants who were the only representatives of their racial or ethnic group.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Association of Theological Schools, Commission on Accrediting, "Table 2.14-B Head Count Enrollment by Degree Program, Age, and Gender, Fall 2009," in "Annual Data Tables," http://www.ats.edu/Resources/Publications/Documents/AnnualDataTables/ 2009-10AnnualDataTables.pdf (accessed Feb. 1, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Claremont School of Theology, "Enrollment for Fall Report Period."

When I began recruiting participants for my study, I limited the PAR group to master's degree students, but I invited doctoral students to fill out questionnaires or be interviewed. Based on my experience of both master's level and doctoral students, I thought that they might have different needs and interests in relation to a PAR process, so it would be difficult to find common ground between them, and one group might dominate the other. In addition, my focus was on women who chose to attend theological school for the first time in midlife. I realized that doctoral students who were over 34 may have entered midlife during the course of their theological educations, and I understood that deciding to do a doctorate, particularly a Ph.D., is very different from choosing to do an M.Div. or even an M.A. However, there were 24 female doctoral students between the ages of 35 and 64 who were enrolled at CST in the fall of 2009, including myself. My initial feeling was that I did not want to totally exclude us from this study. Therefore, after I constructed my questionnaire, I also created a modified version of it for doctoral students.

This is how I came to have Altheia Brite in my study, who, at 61, was the oldest participant. She started her M.Div. degree at CST in 1979, when she was 31 years old. Eight years later, she completed her D.Min. degree. She returned to CST at the age of 60 in order to take classes that would allow her to be ordained in a denomination different from the one in which she had first been ordained. She responded to my request for participants with enthusiasm, first offering to be interviewed, and then later the same day, sending me a completed questionnaire with the following note: "I don't know if I fit your

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> This is a calculated number based on data from Claremont School of Theology, "Enrollment for Fall Report Period."

profile or if you can use anything that I wrote. I got started and couldn't stop." I considered leaving Altheia out of my study, but her participation adds historical perspective, as well as the perspective of an older student who has completed both an M.Div. and a D.Min. Two female midlife doctoral students expressed interest in participating in my research group, but they did not fill out questionnaires or arrange interviews with me, and I eventually decided that I would not pursue including doctoral students in my study. Based on the information I had, I surmised that most of the women doctoral students over 34 had begun their theological educations before they were 35, so their experiences would not fit with the intent of my research. In the end, I had twenty-one participants and interviewed seventeen of them.

Sixteen of the participants in this study were Master of Divinity (M.Div.) students, two were Master of Arts in Religious Education (M.A.R.E.) students, two were Master of Arts (M.A.) students focusing on spiritual care and pastoral counseling, and, as mentioned, one was a non-degree student taking denominational courses. Thus, all of the midlife female M.A.R.E. students at CST participated; 25 percent of the female M.A. students between 30 and 64 were included; and approximately 46 percent of the midlife women M.Div. students at CST were represented in this study (see Table 1). In terms of how long the master's degree students had been attending theological school, the sample is well balanced. There were women who were only in their second semester of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> During the Fall 2009 semester at CST, there were eleven women doctoral students 35 to 39 years old, ten 40 to 49 years old, and three 50 to 64 years old. (Calculations are based on data from Claremont School of Theology, "Enrollment for Fall Report Period.")

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> These are calculations based on data from Claremont School of Theology, "Enrollment for Fall Report Period." While the research for this study took place during the Spring 2010 semester, only Fall 2009 data was available, thus there may be some discrepancies based on changes in enrollment.

theological studies and those who were in their fifth year and ready to graduate. Table 2 depicts the distribution of how much time the master's degree participants had spent at CST and/or ETSC by the number of semesters they had been enrolled in courses.

Table 1. Participants by Degree Program

	Total	Potential Number of	Percent of Potential
Degree Program	Participants	Female Participants	Participants
M.Div.	16	35 (aged 35-64)	45.7%
M.A.R.E.	2	2 (aged 35-64)	100%
M.A.	2	8 (aged 30-64)	25%
Non-degree	1	2 (aged 35-64)	50%

Table 2. Semesters Enrolled in Courses at CST/ETSC<sup>49</sup>

Number of Semesters	Number of M.A./M.Div. Participants
2	4
3	1
4	2
6	4
7	2
8	2
9	2
10	3

Table 3 gives a breakdown of the ages of the participating women at the time they filled out the questionnaire or were interviewed. The third column in this table lists the total number of women enrolled for the Fall 2009 semester in CST master's degree programs according to age group. While the study was carried out during the Spring 2010

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> This data is based on the participants' responses to my question, "What year did you start this program?" Three women told me they had taken a semester off, and a couple noted that they started in a spring semester, rather than in the fall. However, since I did not specifically ask how many semesters participants had been enrolled in courses, this data may be inaccurate.

semester, this data is not available for then. Therefore, it is possible that more or less midlife women enrolled for the spring semester. However, none of the women in this study would have been in a different age range in the fall. The fourth column gives the percentage of women who participated versus the total number of potential participants, based on the fall enrollment data. The 34-year-old woman is not included in this table because she is below the targeted age range. I have also omitted Altheia, because she was non-degree student.

Table 3. Participants by Age Range and Percent of Potential Participants

	Number of	Age Range: Number of Female	Percent of
Age	Master's Degree	Master's Degree Students at	potential
Range	Participants	CST <sup>50</sup>	sample
35-39	3	35-39: 4	75%
40-44	3		-
45-49	3	40-49: 15	40%
50-55	7		
56-60	3		
61-64		50-64: 24	42%
Total	19	35-64: 43	44%

I asked the participants how they named their racial/ethnic identity. Two said "Asian" and one said "Korean." One woman identified herself as African American and another said both African American and Native American. Two women named themselves "Mexican-American," although one began by saying "Hispanic." The rest identified variously as Caucasian, WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant), white, white European, white non-Hispanic, white/gringo, and "human race/'Caucasian'/mixed" (see

 $<sup>^{50}</sup>$  Calculations based on data from Claremont School of Theology, "Enrollment for Fall Report Period."

Table 4). One of the latter group of women did not know how to answer this question, so I prompted her by naming some of these terms.

The women who participated in this study were affiliated with ten different religious denominations (see Table 5). The largest number of them (eight) were United Methodist. Since CST is a United Methodist school, this was to be expected. With the exception of the one Unitarian Universalist, all of the participants were Christian. 51

Table 4. Racial/Ethnic Identity of Participants

Racial/Ethnic Identity	Number of Participants
Asian/Korean	3
African American	1
Biracial: African American and Native American	1
Mexican-American	2
Caucasian/White	14

Table 5. Participants' Religious Affiliation

Religious Affiliation/Denomination	Number of participants
United Methodist Church (UMC)	8
Episcopalian	3
Korean Presbyterian	2
United Church of Christ (UCC)	2
African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)	1
Korean Methodist	1
Baptist	1
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)	1
Roman Catholic	1
Unitarian Universalist	1

Two of the women named their sexual orientation as lesbian; one hesitated and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> The Unitarian Universalist participant thought of herself as culturally Christian with a strong interest in Buddhism.

then said "bisexual"; and the rest consider themselves straight or heterosexual. When I asked the women, "What is your marital/relationship status?" ten said "married"; one said "registered domestic partner/married"; and one said, "committed relationship, about to become domestic partners." One woman was engaged and soon to be married; one said she was widowed; three named themselves as divorced and four as single, although one of the latter shared in her interview that she had been divorced.

Five of the women who participated in the study had no children. Two of them had 3 children living with them, two had two children living at home, and eight women had one child living with them. The remaining four women had adult children who were living on their own. Of these four, one was taking care of a mother in declining health who was living nearby. None of the other women were providing extensive care for a parent, so none of the participants could be considered "sandwich generation" women, that is, women who were simultaneously caring for children and parents.

### **Interviews and Questionnaires**

Interviews are the typical method used for phenomenological research, and many kinds of qualitative research rely on them. For this study, participants were given the option of doing an interview, filling out a questionnaire (which had the same questions as the interview guide), or a combination of both. Five women filled out the questionnaire completely, and I did a follow-up phone interview with one and an in-person interview with another. A few other women started to fill out the questionnaire, but most of the data they contributed came from in-person interviews with them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> See Appendix C for the final version of the questionnaire and Appendix D for the final version of the interview guide.

The questions I asked were designed to elicit information that would create a picture of what brings midlife women to theological schools and what their experiences of theological education are. I sought to learn how participants had decided to attend seminary and how that decision fit into the context of their lives. To answer the question of how these midlife women experienced theological education, I asked questions related to various dimensions of their lives as students. Thus, participants were invited to tell their own stories and voice their thoughts and feelings about their experiences as students. My "demographic" or census-type questions were aimed at collecting descriptive data and information that would provide a fuller understanding of the lives and characteristics of female midlife theological school students.

The questionnaire document that I emailed to potential participants included at the top of the first page a note that gave participants the freedom not to answer questions, provided information about maintaining confidentiality, and stated they were granting me permission to use their material in my study by completing the questionnaire. Readers were directed to the end of the document for more information about the study. This section included contact information for myself and my dissertation committee chair and descriptions of the objectives and methods of the study, who would have access to the data collected, potential risks and benefits associated with participation, the participant's rights, and what would be published or shared. When I interviewed people, they signed and were given a copy of a consent form with the same information, plus a section on "What will be involved in participating?" On both the questionnaires and the interview consent forms, the women were given the opportunity to provide a pseudonym in order to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> See Appendix E.

ensure confidentiality.

Initially, I sent my questionnaire only to those people who had expressed interest in participating in my research. One woman began filling it out the same day and sent me a request for clarification about one of my questions. I responded to her and changed the questionnaire. Ten days later, I sent another mass email to all CST students with the subject line: "Still seeking women between 35 & 64 for interviews or questionnaires." This email included two attachments: a questionnaire for master's degree students and one for doctoral students. My questionnaire/interview guide underwent some revisions as I started receiving completed questionnaires and doing interviews. Therefore, around the beginning of April, I sent a copy of my revised questionnaire to women who had expressed interest in doing interviews or questionnaires but who had not yet done either. I put revisions in bold type and transferred the demographic questions to the end of my questionnaire. As Robert Weiss notes in his book on interviewing, if an interviewer begins by asking for "census data," it establishes an understanding that the interviewer just wants "the facts," and therefore, interviewees are less likely to give full, detailed narrative accounts.<sup>54</sup> I had discovered this to be true with my questionnaire in particular, so, as suggested by Weiss' observation, I moved my short-answer, census-type questions to the end of my interview guide as well as my questionnaire.

The interviews were semi-structured: all the questions were open-ended, and I did not follow my interview guide in a strict manner, although I tried to ensure all my questions were answered. After the first few interviews, I had a better sense of which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Robert S. Weiss, *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 51.

questions naturally flowed together, so I rearranged the sequence of the questions on my guide to reduce the need to flip back and forth between pages. The lengths of the interviews ranged from about one and a half to two and a half hours, even when participants had answered many of my questions on the questionnaire in advance. Two interviews were divided between two sessions, although for one of these, the second session was just a phone call to get demographic data there was not time to collect during the initial interview.

The interviews were arranged for times and locations that were convenient and comfortable both for the women being interviewed and for me. 55 Since most of the women were commuters, the majority of the interviews took place in the CST library at a time when an individual interviewee was already on campus. I usually suggested meeting in the Allen J. Moore Multicultural Center, which was a separate room in the library that was little used. Other locations in the library also became interview contexts (including the atrium), according to interviewees' desires. One woman asked to do the interview outside, while another one asked me to come to her home, which was close to campus. Because the library's hours were shortened after the semester ended, I met with one woman in a room in the new After Hours Study Lounge (since she lived on campus) and with another in a room in the church next to campus (since that was where she worked).

I had experienced some face-to-face interactions with all of the women I interviewed before I interviewed them. However, I was unable to put faces with the names of the women who filled out questionnaires, making it more difficult to have a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> I lived on campus, so it was convenient for me to do interviews there. I arranged or rearranged my schedule to be available during times when interviewees were available.

sense of who they were and their personalities. Since the interviewees and I had some prior acquaintances with each other, I did not feel a need to try to build rapport with them as we began our interviews. Plus, time was precious, so it seemed important to jump right into the interviewing process. Nonetheless, there were times when I observed interviewees assuming or guessing I held particular attitudes or beliefs, or, since they did not know where I stood on a particular topic, they made it clear that they were just expressing their perspective and did not expect me to share their views. In some cases, I think they were simply practicing the type of sensitive discourse they had learned at CST, but there were other times when I sensed discomfort on the interviewee's part because she did not know what my perspective was. The example that stands out in my mind was when one woman prefaced a set of comments with, "I'm gonna be very, very, very, very honest, and I'm gonna pray that you do not take anything that I say as offensive." She proceeded to talk about how people are fighting for the rights of LGBTQ people, but women are still being oppressed and treated as "second-class citizens" around the world. I got the impression that she thought I was a lesbian, but it is possible that she thought I was part of the group of gay-rights people she was critiquing. Reading through the transcript of her interview, it became clear to me that she was sharing a new-found passion for women's liberation, while also possibly still working through her thoughts and feelings about non-heterosexual persons. Therefore, not knowing whether I would support her or not, she was making herself vulnerable by sharing this passion and new understanding with me. After giving me a soapbox speech, she was again apologetic: "So, for me—and I hope I didn't offend you in any way—it's like, we gotta do something about these women!"

I was sometimes surprised at the personal information women whom I hardly knew shared with me. I can only speculate at reasons for this, and it is probably a combination of factors such as the CST context, individual personalities, midlife self-confidence, and my (I hope) nonjudgmental presence. Sometimes I felt like I was serving in a pastoral role by listening and encouraging sharing. What many women were reluctant to share were names of people about whom they were saying something negative, whether it was professors or other students. Part of this was self-protective, in case they were identified through my work by those they had critiqued. Yet even those who did name names would frequently add in positive statements, such as, "I like her as a person," or, "I respect the work he does." Thus there was a general hesitance to seem overly critical of a particular person.

The women all seemed prepared for, if not totally comfortable with, the interview format. This may be due to the reality that, in the U.S., we live in an interview society. <sup>56</sup> Several women made comments like, "Go ahead, ask me what you need to," when I apologized for switching topics and looking through my interview guide for the next question I wanted to ask. A few women shared concerns that what they said was going to sound bad when it was transcribed. One woman even asked, after talking for several minutes, "Can we erase that and start all over?" Thus, some women were aware of the lack of fluidity in their speech or the non-linear direction of their storytelling.

There were just a few instances where women expressed concern that something

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, "The Interview: From Neutral Stance to Political Involvement," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 698.

they said would be identified with them or that I would share personally identifying information. I reassured them that confidentiality would be maintained. I also told most, if not all, of the women I interviewed that they would have an opportunity to read drafts of my dissertation and respond to them. There were some women who, out of curiosity, asked questions about my research, and a few women said they wanted to receive or looked forward to reading a copy of the final version of my dissertation. Again, I told them that I would email drafts to them, and I also promised that I would share final copies of the project with the women who participated in the study.

With the first couple interviews I did, I worked to maintain the distance of a researcher and not insert myself into interviews. However, I found it unnatural to refrain from any sort of affirming or encouraging comments. Also, there were times when a woman I was interviewing would invite me to share something, like when one woman asked if I had had a similar experience when I was an M.Div. student. I decided that, since I was a woman interviewing women, the interviews would work better and be more comfortable if I conversed more naturally. Still, I refrained from diverting interview conversations to discussions of my experiences or ideas, although I often found myself wanting to share my perspectives and engage in conversation with some of the women. I began wishing that I was not moving out of state that summer and would be around Claremont for another semester, so I could develop friendships or have further conversations with some of the women with whom I had connected.

### <u>Limitations of the Study</u>

Since the research design for this dissertation does not include any research with

male students or female students who are not in the middle-age range (with the exception of one), I cannot make a definite claim that the findings are unique to female midlife students. In addition, this study is limited to midlife women during a particular time period, so the perspectives and experiences shared may not be generalizable to women of different historical cohorts. With only twenty-one participants in the study, it is difficult to determine the influence of other aspects of social location (race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and so on) on the results. There may have been women who did not volunteer to participate because CST and ETSC are small school communities, and they did not want to risk having personal details shared and connected with them. Women under a lot of stress who had limited support and time would be less likely to volunteer to participate in a study such as this. These and other reasons for not participating may have left out crucial voices. This study is based specifically on the experiences of midlife women attending CST and ETSC, which are relatively liberal schools, so its generalizability to midlife women at other theological schools, especially evangelical ones, may be limited. Given that my data was mostly confined to what the participants in the study shared with me, I do not have any outsiders' perspectives on the women's stories or how they are perceived as theological students. Finally, the questions I asked and my interview format may have been too constrictive, thus leading to omissions of helpful and insightful data.

#### Summary

This dissertation is primarily a phenomenological research project designed to answer two questions: "Why do some midlife women decide to attend theological

school?" and, "What are midlife women's experiences of theological education?"

Twenty-one female master's degree students between the ages of 34 and 61 participated in this study through interviews and questionnaires. Nine Christian denominations, plus Unitarian Universalism, were represented by the participants. Asian, African American, white, Mexican American, biracial, lesbian, heterosexual, and bisexual women were included. Their relationship statuses ranged from never married to widowed; some had young children at home, others had adult children, and some had no children. A major limitation of this study is that it only includes midlife women students enrolled at Claremont School of Theology.

#### **CHAPTER 3**

# Women's Journeys to Theological School

Every person's life story is different. Various factors influence each major decision we make. The decision to attend a theological school is one such major decision. A researcher could focus on just one or two women's life stories and explore the personality traits and all the experiences from childhood on that may have led to a woman deciding to attend seminary. For this study, I asked each participant to "sketch out the path or major events of your adult life." The request was inspired by Terri Apter's study of eighty midlife women between the ages of 39 and 55. I I thought that asking for this information might provide a means for comparing the participants' life journeys with the patterns Apter found in her study. It also supplied background information and a context for each woman's decision to attend theological school. In sharing the paths of their adult lives, participants, especially those I interviewed, tended to connect right into their stories of how they came to CST or ETSC.

To honor each woman's particularity and the uniqueness of her journey, this chapter focuses on telling individual participants' stories as distinct wholes. In addition, the journey to seminary narratives that I created for each participant, the majority of which are provided here, served as one step in the process of phenomenological analysis. To create these narratives, I drew out of each woman's interview or questionnaire the statements that seemed to be the most significant and essential for describing her adult life and path to theological school. Generally, if a woman shared a particular experience or event, I assumed it was important. Once I had developed these narratives, the next step

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Apter, 37.

was to discern the major themes in the women's journeys to deciding to apply to theological school. Chapter 4 will provide a discussion of these themes.

In her book, Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes, Nicola Slee names narrative as one of the processes or strategies of women's "faithing" or meaningmaking. She says, "Perhaps more than any other faithing strategy, story represents the mode nearest to experience, most concrete and accessible, and yet at the same time most capable of capturing the complexity, dynamism and nuanced nature of lived experience."<sup>2</sup> Since this dissertation is partly a study of midlife women's experiences with deciding to attend seminary, narrative is a crucial tool for looking at and understanding these experiences. Without storytelling, depth, nuance, dynamism, and complexity were missing from answers to questions such as, "Why did you choose to attend a theological school at this time in your life? Why now and not earlier?" After reading two or three brief questionnaire answers to these particular questions, I realized I needed to ask more, so I added, "If you experienced a 'call,' please tell me about the nature of the call—how did you experience it? How did you know it was a call?" Then the stories emerged, and the stories depicted the women's "faithing" processes. For most of the women, going to seminary was part of their faith or spiritual journey. Making this decision sometimes had a degree of significance different from other decisions in their lives, because it meant responding to a yearning or a divine call they had not responded to in such a way before. In sum, sharing the women's stories is necessary for portraying something of the fullness of how they came to be students at CST.

Drawing directly from what was shared with me, I wrote a narrative for each

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Slee, 68.

participant that included the trajectory of her adult life and what I discerned to be the key elements of her journey to theological school. I then sent what I had written for each person to the woman personally and invited her to correct and edit it. She was also given the option of having it left out of this chapter. If I did not receive a response from a particular participant, I did not include her story here. Two women who specifically asked me to omit their narratives were women of color, so I wondered if the idea of having their stories in print seemed too great an exposure for them in a culture and small-school context in which they already felt vulnerable. Thus, all the narratives included in this chapter have been approved for inclusion here as they are. Some stories take more space to tell; some women gave me more details; and some women desired more privacy than others. For the sake of space, many of the narratives are greatly condensed. Thus, some significant statements may have been lost. Often, details and depth have been sacrificed. The narratives contain both my summaries and direct quotes of the women's own words. Some of these words are from interviews and questionnaires, some are from emails, and some are from essays that women shared with me.

#### Altheia Brite

Altheia graduated from a prep school in 1966 and went to a junior college, then to a university. "I worked as a pediatric nurse for the year following my graduation from nursing school and trained during my second job as a nurse to be an ICU nurse before

joining the Peace Corps in 1972." She served in the Peace Corps for two years. Those two years affected her "radically and were critically influential, I believe, during the years between 1976 to 1979, leading up to the journey into the ministry and my decision to attend seminary." Upon returning to the States following her Peace Corps service, "I moved on the spur of the moment to Tucson, Arizona. I became involved in a Christian Church (I had been raised in the Unitarian Church back East) and had a call to the ministry in 1979." In response to the question of why she chose to pursue a master's degree in a theological/religious studies program, she answered, "I didn't know much at all about religious studies, theological degrees or Christianity for that matter. I did tell myself if the students at seminary were a bunch of Jesus freaks I would leave immediately. What I knew was that I had a call to 'go to seminary' and was advised by my pastor at the time to go to Claremont and get an M.Div." So, "I applied in the spring, interviewed in July 1979 and arrived on campus in August. I was 31 years old." She completed an M.Div. in four years and then went on to get a D.Min.: "I chose to get the Doctorate when I did, because I wanted to prove to myself I could do it and I needed the status as a clergywoman. Men could get by with an M.Div., but women needed the Doctorate to get noticed." During the four years she was in the D.Min. program, Altheia was employed as a part-time, solo pastor for a church and as a nurse: "I worked as a nurse through most of the years I was in ministry, working the two professions side by side, because the ministry could not sustain me." While still completing a master's degree

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> I have occasionally corrected punctuation and spellings in citations from documents participants wrote, but, for the most part, they are cited as written. Citations from interviews may exclude repeated words and filler words, such as "um" and "you know." I have also made some changes at the request of participants and to make non-native speakers' English more understandable.

in nursing, she returned to CST at the age of sixty to take courses for the "UMC connection." Previously ordained in the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, she sought "full connection with the denomination whose churches I have been serving since 2003. I was appointed full time in 2007 and want to know all that I can about the denomination that has embraced me at last."

### Julie

After high school, Julie went to college, and then she went to work for a book company. While she was working, she got married. She and her husband soon moved to a suburban area for her husband's work and lived there for three years. Then her husband decided he wanted to study more. At first, Julie said, "no," and "we had a disagreement. But, he wanted to come," so they came to the U.S. for him to study. Thus, for another four years, Julie did not work and was a stay-at-home wife. After about two years in the U.S., she also became a mother. With her husband's entry into a Ph.D. program in Claremont, Julie moved once again. At the time, she never imagined that she would go to seminary. It was "not at all on my list to do," she said.

One day, a professor called to talk to Julie's husband. Julie answered the phone, and since her husband was not home, she entered into a conversation with the professor. The professor asked Julie, "Why are you staying at home?" and suggested that she do something, namely, start a degree program at CST. Julie responded, "Ah, yeah, if I have a chance, I will do it. Ok. Bye-bye.' And then I hung up the phone. But I never considered anything. But that night, she emailed *him* [her husband] that I need to do something." The application deadline for that year was past, yet the professor said that

she could arrange to get Julie in. Julie, however, was not interested. When she visited Korea soon after that, she told her parents, "This happened to me. It's so funny.' And then they're like, 'Do it." This spurred Julie to action, and she collected the records she needed to apply to CST while she was in Korea. One of the things she thought was that going to school would help her with her English skills, since "I was struggling a lot with English." Then she added, "Not very pure reason to go to seminary, right?"

However, Julie did not know what kind of a degree to work toward. She asked her husband what kinds of degrees CST had. He mentioned the M.Div. and a degree in religious education. She decided to do a master's degree. In retrospect, Julie believed she was really looking for personal enlightenment and a sense of her own voice; she wanted to do something for herself, and that was a big part of why she decided to go to seminary.

#### Natalie

Natalie went to college in Europe and then "worked in marketing for book publishers in Europe and North America for six years." She moved to Los Angeles in 1998 to be a student in the full time, two-year MBA program at the University of Southern California. Following that, "I worked as a Marketing Director in the entertainment industry for six years." Feeling dissatisfied in the workplace, she "decided (against the advice of family and friends) to move into a not-for-profit environment, raising funds for a parish school." Since that time, she had worked as Director of Development at an Episcopal school. Natalie had never married or had children, but had been "very involved in my church and other volunteer organizations."

In response to the question about what her goal was in attending seminary, Natalie

responded, "As Anselm said in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, 'faith seeks understanding.' I've had a strong faith in God since I was about 7 years old, even though my parents and sisters are not practicing Christians. (I attended a Methodist boarding school in Europe from the ages of 7 to 18). Yet, I always found it hard to describe this faith to others." Therefore, "I started taking classes at ETSC/CST at the age of 35 because I was curious about theology and found that I was not learning enough simply by attending church and church groups. I had been thinking about studying theology for at least ten years but my atheist family and friends had discouraged it, saying that it was not practical." However, she had "felt a strong calling to be a lay leader in the church... My call to be a lay leader came in the middle of the night, just before my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday; I felt paralyzed by an overwhelming feeling of the Holy Spirit entering my heart. I knew that something significant had changed in my life from that moment on and I had received a gift that would enable me to be a lay leader. It was like the description of the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost in Acts."

### Sierra

After high school, Sierra went to college and earned a bachelor's degree with majors in anthropology and history. She intended to go to graduate school to get a degree in anthropology, but "somehow I got it into my head that I should be in education instead." So, she went to a school with a "really good education program." She started out in elementary education and then "decided that I really wanted to work with high school kids." Finally earning her teaching credential in 1997, she "was able to get a job right away at a middle school. And I taught middle school for five years, and, while I

love education, I felt like kids were not the right age group for me, particularly middle school." Therefore, "I took some time off from education itself, and I did other work." She "worked in the business sphere" until she decided to go to graduate school to get a Master of Divinity degree.

Sierra did not grow up in a church. She "got involved in the evangelical charismatic church movement of Christianity when I was in college." Yet, "I've always had a kind of love-hate relationship with the church. Some things about it I absolutely love. And then there are things about it that I think, 'Really? Wow, this is so bizarre." Specifically, "being in the more evangelical-charismatic movement, there's not a lot of opportunity for women, and I was really turned off by that." So she began doing her own research and reading feminist biblical scholars and theologians. "And that really helped me a lot. It helped me understand that men have really done a disservice in a lot of ways to what church should look like and have done a lot of damage to women throughout history and [to] how women experience the spiritual realm. That was one of the reasons why I felt like I needed to come to seminary. I wanted to explore and experience more than what I was gaining on my own."

Before she decided to attend seminary, though, "I went to a lot of different churches trying to find the right fit. And I never really found one, until I stopped going to church, just cut it out of my life. I still had a relationship with God, and I still felt very spiritual, . . . but I had to cut myself off from the church because, for me personally, it was really damaging. It was damaging my spirit, my mind, and my heart in ways that I just couldn't reconcile going to church with what I was experiencing and exploring and

reading. Once you start reading what women have been writing—and being something so different to what you experience in the church service—it's really hard to reconcile those two things." Through her reading, "I was experiencing freedom." She found that there were a variety of images for God in the scriptures besides "this white man with the white beard." The authors she was reading were sharing women's experiences and saying, "God is loving, and God is kind, and God cares for people like a mother and a father." For Sierra, "It was like, wow, no one ever told me this before. Why wasn't I getting this in church? Why has this been hidden from me?"

For two or three years, Sierra did not attend church. Then she met the person who would become her life partner, and this person said it was really important to her that they go to church together. At first, Sierra still did not want anything to do with church. But then they did some internet research and found the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). This turned out to be "a good place for me to go to be healed." The church "used inclusive language. There were women ministers. There were gays and lesbians doing all kinds of things that I didn't think could be possible in a church. So, God really did a lot of healing in my heart as far as hating men and hating what men have done in the name of God and in the name of the church. So that was really good."

During one church service, the new female pastor "started to serve communion. And I was just watching this, and I'm like, I have to do this. I have to go. I have to go to seminary." She does not know "where the idea came from. I don't know why it was at that time, but I just remember, she was blessing the sacraments, and getting ready to share and serve, and I was just watching her. And it was just this, it wasn't even like this

voice, but it was this feeling of, I have to do this. I have to do that. I am gonna be doing that. I need to do that. That is what I need to do." She adds, "It was just this mystical, spiritual thing. It's the only way I can describe it." Sierra turned to her partner, and "I said, 'I have to do that.' And she said, 'I know.' It was like, 'Oh, really? Okay.' So, after the service, she goes up to the pastor and she said, '[Sierra] has to go to seminary. Where should she go?" This caught Sierra off guard: "God had been talking to her," but Sierra "hadn't taken that leap yet."

Sierra was prepared to wait until her partner finished her master's degree before she returned to school, but together they decided she could at least apply and take one class. Sierra's partner called CST "and she talked to the people in the admissions office and the registrar's," and she found out it was okay to just take one class; declaring a degree was not necessary. "And she had all this information, and I'm like, huh? Wow, ok, I guess I'm doing this. It was kind of overwhelming. I did everything that I needed to do: I got all the paperwork in; I got all my transcripts; I wrote the essay." She requested reference letters. "People were more excited than I was. I was scared. I'm like, oh, I'm not gonna get in; I'm not gonna get in. And I got in. I'm like, wow, ok, I guess I'm supposed to be here." Sierra's "original goal when I first came here was to be a church pastor."

## Hannah

Hannah went to college and "after graduating I worked as a teacher for one year in a middle school and got married." Hannah and her husband then moved to the U.S. for him to study. He was preparing to be a lawyer when his father passed away. They

returned to their home country. There was no "financial support, so we had to stay" there, and Hannah's husband gave up his plan to study law. "For five years, I worked as a tutor in a private institution." During this time, her husband decided to go to seminary because he wanted to become a pastor. "And he didn't decide by himself; he discuss with me, and I agreed. . . . So, once he, my husband, wanted to be a pastor, I thought that I also wanted to be involved in church ministry. So that's why I planned to go to theological seminary. But, at that time, I couldn't attend school, because I had to take care of my children—they're very little. And I had to [provide] financial support for my husband at that time." However, "I always talk to my husband, 'When I turn to 40, I'm going to start. I'm going to start studying."

In 2002, "My husband and I came to the [U.S.] again because he wanted to continue his studying." He completed a Th.M. and then they moved to Claremont for him to begin doctoral work. At that time, "I decided to go to a theological school." She had planned "to go to a theological school when my kids are grown enough to handle themselves. And I thought that it was the time when I entered this school." Her kids were in the fifth and seventh grades when she began at CST, which was also right around the time she turned 41 (in American age).

Hannah chose CST because her husband recommended it. Fuller Seminary was more familiar to people from her denomination, so, "I was thinking about going to Fuller, but my husband said that Fuller is, the studying, learning for Fuller is what you know. So nothing new. So, if you're [wanting a] challenge, or you want something new, it is better to go to CST."

Hannah's desire to be a minister was connected to her husband's position as a pastor. "I can't think separate from my husband. So, I always walk with him, and think together with him. So, he's a pastor. And, that's the reason. Because he's a pastor and I am involved in the church ministry. But, I don't work as the pastor's wife. Don't like 'pastor's wife." Hannah did not want to be called or thought of as simply "the pastor's wife." She wanted to have some standing of her own, and with her education, she wanted to move from being a children's pastor to being a pastor for adults.

## Elise

Elise graduated from high school in 1983, went to college, and then taught English for a couple years before going to law school. After law school, she went into private practice. When her second child was born, she "got out of law and taught at a law school for three years. And then got back into the practice of law because I missed it."

Along the way, Elise had a miscarriage. In response to my questions, "Do you feel like you're going through a midlife crisis or transition? Do you feel like you have experienced this in the past?" she included the following: "I did go through a crisis of faith in my past related to a lost pregnancy. Going through that is important to what I bring to ministry. Without my faith having been seriously challenged, I wonder what I would have had to offer others by way of understanding, insight, etc." After two girls, she and her husband wanted to have a boy, but the baby "was genetically not viable." This experience caused her to ask some deep questions of meaning. She wondered, "Why could I be so excited about that pregnancy and lose the pregnancy?" She was told that the fetus was "not consistent with life." The wording of that caused her to ask, "Then why

did I get pregnant at all? What was the point of that?" The answers that she had grown up with were unsatisfactory or did not make sense. She began questioning "the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-controlling, all-loving nature of God. I couldn't reconcile all-powerful and all-loving with what happened to me. If God was all-powerful and therefore responsible for the miscarriage, then God could not be all-loving. This was crystallized by the death of the infant son of friends of ours. The baby was smothered to death by the family dog after the baby had been left to sleep on his parents' bed and the dog jumped up to snuggle next to him. If God was all-powerful and could have prevented the baby's death, how could God be all-loving and not do so?" Elise called the death of this child "completely senseless." She found the explanations of this senseless death to be "awful": that it was all part of God's plan, that God needed the baby more than his family, and so on. "Got to a point where I just wasn't sure there was a God at all. I knew what I had been taught wasn't true," so Elise was not sure any of it was true.

She struggled with these questions for a long time. She continued going to church because she wanted her children to be there, but she stopped taking communion and being involved in other church activities. One Sunday during communion, "I heard a voice over my shoulder that said, 'You believe, or you'd be taking communion.' And I knew that was Jesus." She also knew in hearing that sentence why she was not taking communion, and if she "truly thought there was no God, then why not take communion?" If she took communion, she would not "stick out like a sore thumb." Out of this experience, she "re-found my faith. It didn't answer any of my questions. I still had to struggle through, ok, well then, how do I make sense of all of this? But at least I knew, I

believed there was a God." She realized that there is free will in the world, "And bad things just happen, and sometimes there is no purpose to it." God does not make these kinds of things happen and cannot force them to happen, neither can God stop them from happening. But "God is always there, providing us with guidance and help and support."

Elise wrote, "I am attending seminary because I experienced a call to ordained ministry." She described her call as coming "when I was asked to preach for my pastor when he was away to Annual Conference. Preaching was amazing. It was fulfilling and exciting in a way I have trouble explaining. And afterwards, dozens of people told me I missed my calling. So I questioned whether I should go into ministry." As the chair of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, Elise met with her pastor regularly. At their next meeting following her sermon, Ann mentioned her experience with preaching and "how powerful it had been. And so, we talked about calling." Elise "thought about it for quite awhile." She was not sure at first if she was called to ordained ministry, so she initially pursued dual tracks: she declared candidacy for ministry and enrolled in the Lay Speaking Academy as part of the lay ministry program in the United Methodist Church. Part of the reason for this was that she felt like she did not have time in her life to explore one and then switch to the other. However, by the time the Lay Speaking Academy was over, she was sure she was called to ordained ministry. Going to graduate school also appealed to her because, "I felt that I needed more preparation to enter ministry than the licensing school. Moreover, I recognized a certain academic side to myself that would respond to grad school."

## Dena

Dena went to college and immediately after graduation, she "began working in the entertainment industry, which I did steadily for almost twenty years." She met her domestic partner in her mid-twenties. Yet, after eighteen years in entertainment, "I was starting to be dissatisfied with my career in television, even though I was quite successful." She began thinking that she wanted to do something different: "I wanted to do something that mattered and hoped to change an overindulgent life." She thought she "wanted a simpler life," and she did not think that what she was producing was "necessarily enough of a value in life."

Dena "had been interested in ministry when I was a teenager, but did not pursue [it] because the church of my background did not ordain women and I wanted to pursue entertainment instead." For part of her life, she was not involved in a church. "A big part of why I was not involved in church for several years was, working on my career, but also dealing with my sexuality. And didn't sort of see how it could integrate. And then as I decided that I'd like to figure out how to be a spiritual person, a Christian, even, and be gay, I started going to a Baptist church that seemed like it was 'don't ask, don't tell,' but wasn't." She thought the people who had invited her were gay, but if they were, they were not out. "And so I was having a really positive, happy return to church that then fell apart once I came out." She came out to the pastor because she was "about to be named the financial secretary of the church. So it was a lifetime appointment if you wanted it, but an officer of the church, and I thought that they would probably want to know. So I told the pastor, and he said, 'Oh my God, you can't be in any leadership, ever, if you're

gay." Dena "was crushed. But since the church experience had been so meaningful, I decided against giving up on churches forever."

In her work world, Dena "was very much sort of the chaplain of the television's crew. It's been fun since to see some of those people and have them say, 'Well, yeah, this actually makes a lot of sense.' I mean, there wasn't God-talk," but she was meeting some emotional needs. About a year after leaving the Baptist church, "A woman that I worked with died. . . . And I spoke at her funeral at work. And, did a Christian funeral. And, it kind of was the first time I stepped out as a Christian at work." This experience of presiding over a funeral, "was a very important spiritual experience" for Dena. After that funeral, she decided to apply to Fuller Seminary. She chose that school because she thought it "lined up better with my theological background," but she "was rejected because I came out in the application." As she recalled, this was what led her to seek out a new church: "I remember being completely upset that Fuller had rejected me for being gay, and I finally said, 'Well, forget it. If I'm going to be gay and a Christian, I better find a gay church.' And I'd never really wanted to go to an all-gay church, just because I don't want any church to consist of all one type of person. . . . So, I remember being devastated by being rejected at Fuller, and I remember Googling 'gay churches in Los Angeles,' which got me to a wonderful website, gaychurch.org, which lists all the gayfriendly churches in the country. And I found St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran, which is where I go now. So I went there for a while, and somewhere in the fall, applied at Claremont. And now had my new pastor write the application letter."

Dena had thought "Claremont would be too academically rigorous for me, and

perhaps too liberal." Originally, "I did not come to be ordained . . . I hoped to get a theological degree, without knowing what I would be doing with it." When I asked her if she came for personal self-exploration, she replied, "Yeah, I mean, I should look at my application letter, but I think I just said, 'I really like talking about God and thinking about God, and I'd like to have more tools to be able to do that better.' And I think I probably thought I'd like to write, and I still do. I mean, that really hasn't changed, but I think I thought it might be nice to be writing Christian works, and, whatever that meant. I didn't know if it was going to be popular, self-help stuff, or, I doubt I thought I was going to be writing theological tomes. But I don't know." She thought she would write things that were helpful to others.

## Jackie

Jackie graduated from high school in 1981. "From there, I went to tech school and learned the photo industry." She received a certificate in audiovisual technology and, following that, went to a university. "I did my first two years there, and then I got married. And I was not allowed to continue to go to college." A few years after she got divorced, she returned to school at another university, studied for two years, and earned a bachelor's degree in community studies and political science. This fit well with the work she subsequently became engaged in. For two years, Jackie was part of an urban ministries training program in the United Methodist Church. Around the end of this program, she remarried. The work she had been doing led into her being hired to fill a newly created position as the Coordinator of Urban Ministries for her area.

About eight months after she began this position, Jackie went to her first annual

conference. One night during the conference, the bishop did "sort of an altar call to anyone who [was] feeling a call to ministry, ... And I was up in the balcony, and way in the back, ... I was just going to see what this was like and everything, and I didn't know anything about the structure." But she felt the touch of the Holy Spirit, "and I was overwhelmed by the call to go down, just to go down, and be prayed for, but ... I didn't feel specifically like I should be a pastor, or whatever it was going to be. But I was drawn down there, and I went down a whole bunch of stairs." She remembers being at the front of the worship space, crying, "I was just pouring water, and I couldn't speak." When two people asked, "What can we pray for?' I couldn't say anything. ... Some of the pastors that I had been working with ... came over and got me at the end. ... They were affirming my call, whatever it is was, and I thought, I don't even know what it is. .. I just didn't have anything to say; I couldn't even speak."

Jackie had a three-year contract with her job, so, for three years, she lived with this experience of being called. Since she worked primarily with pastors, she "watched them and listened to them and asked them questions." She also sat in "on a lot of private conversations" among the clergy. After her three-year contract ended, she was able to continue working in the same role for another two years. She continued watching pastors, asking questions, studying, and praying. Eventually, it became clear to her that she had a call to ordained ministry. Contributing to this sense of call was her experience of the Eucharist and seeing herself serving it: "I have a very beautiful and direct kind of connection and love of the sacrament, the sacrament of Eucharist. I don't know why, but . . . I could go every day and I would probably cry. It's just like that. And when I'd think

about it, when I did think about it, I would see me offering the table to people in unconventional places, like under bridges. That came up all the time." Jackie felt a strong pull toward providing sacramental ministry to people in locations like bars and the areas under overpasses. Since only ordained elders can consecrate the Eucharist in the United Methodist Church, Jackie knew she would have to go to seminary for a master's degree. She decided, "It'd be nice if it was a United Methodist one, and where the sun is really shining a lot." She "was done living in winter climates." So, CST was the obvious choice, it being "the sunniest" of the thirteen UMC seminaries.

Jackie was also encouraged to attend CST by several of the clergy with whom she worked. "They knew a lot about Claremont. And, several times in conversation, not about seminary, but just about ministry or whatever issue it was we were talking about, I had said something—I don't even know what it was—and people had said, 'Oh, that's very process.'" Jackie "didn't know what they were talking about," but she learned that CST was the place to go to learn about process theology. "So people recommended it from knowing me." Jackie also interviewed two women who had attended CST. They spoke highly of an adjunct professor in urban ministries. Jackie "had met him several times and gone to several workshops of his" because of her commitment to and involvement in urban ministries. The fact that he was at CST "was a draw, too."

While in the process of her second divorce, Jackie visited the CST campus.

Following her tour of the campus, she went to a city park to eat the delicious deli sandwich she had bought and enjoy the warmth of southern California. With an image in her mind of Claremont as "a glass cheese dish," an "academic, protective bubble," she sat

in the park and asked God, "Why, God, would you pick me up out of this place where I know I'm doing good work, people are being helped—and I'm being fed—and there's so much more need, and put me here and set me aside in this time?" The answer came to her that she was there "to study," because she would not be able to do the rest of what she was called to do unless she got an M.Div. But why Claremont? "I didn't have an answer or anything, but I remember sitting there and thinking about it and writing and asking my questions and praying." Then she went to San Francisco and took her teenage daughter with her to visit Glide Memorial United Methodist Church, which is in the Tenderloin District. They walked about five blocks to the church, stepping over people who were "very nearly naked" and walking past people who were "strung out," a "man peeing in the middle of the street with almost nothing on," and "a couple who were engaged in sexual activity." After church, they walked past the two blocks of people lined up for the lunch served by Glide. As they walked, Jackie told her daughter about her time in the park, "and my question for God, 'Why would you pick me up out of this urban setting and put me in such a safe and isolated and kind of hoity-toity place, when there's good stuff to be done?' 'I don't know why God would do that," she said to her daughter. Her daughter replied, "I do. I wanta be safe." . . . And it just hit me: duh, I forgot I was a mom. I'm not doing this by myself. Oh, man. I was tearing up, and she was tearing up, and I thought, Oh-h-h, shame on me for even asking the question." Then Jackie knew why she needed to attend CST and live in Claremont.

#### Beth

Beth was working on a B.A. degree when she got married at the age of twenty-

one. After completing her degree, she and her husband spent a year in Europe for his studies, "then returned back stateside so he could get his teaching credential. I went to work to support us, doing primarily clerical work. We moved to central California when he finished his schooling, where I continued working as a clerk/secretary. We lived there for five years, had two children, then moved to Arizona so he could complete his advanced degrees. I started working as a temp," before deciding to go back to school for a master's degree in order to "advance my career and get a better job. I eventually ended up working for a city government in HR [human resources], where I have worked for the past twenty years."

Beth wrote, "I felt the call to go into ministry about five years ago but decided to ignore it . . . until doors started opening and I eventually decided I couldn't ignore the call any longer." At first, she did not know that what she was experiencing was a call: "I didn't know that that was what it was. I didn't really think of it as a call." She had been active at church for almost twenty years, doing the things she had seen her parents do, because that was what it meant to her to be involved in church: teach Sunday school, serve on committees, sing in the choir, and so on. When she was asked to direct a street ministry, Beth dove in with both feet. As she was doing that work, she started feeling like she was supposed to do more, and began looking at "the possibility of devoting more of my life to ministry." She considered becoming "a Licensed Local Pastor . . . until I found out they were not guaranteed appointments." Instead, she started taking the required courses to become a lay speaker. In one of these courses, she was asked to share her call story. Not knowing what to say, she shared her journey to that point. A man passed her a

piece of paper with the following words on it: 'It is a call." She realized then that God had worked through the woman who had asked her to direct the street ministry to get her on the path to devoting her life to ministry. Yet, she felt like she needed to do more than the lay speaking coursework, so she "decided to become a Certified Lay Speaker."

"After taking the classes to become a Certified Lay Speaker, I then met with my District Superintendent, who suggested going for full ordination." However, she was busy and had kids in high school and college, so she did not think about pursuing this. One day, a few years later, she said, "Ok, God, give me a sign if you want me to do this." Soon after that, she received a retirement statement in the mail and realized that she was really close to being able to get a full retirement. She went to her husband and said that becoming a full-time minister was looking more like a possibility. Then she spoke with her pastor, who gave her a book called, The Christian as Minister. As she read it, she thought more and more, "This is me." She went back to her pastor, and he gave her a workbook that helps people discern what exactly their call is. Beth realized that interests in religion and service ran throughout her life. So, she went back to her pastor again and said, "I feel even stronger that this is what I want to do. What do I do now?" The pastor told her she had to go to seminary and go through the candidacy process. One day, her husband came home from working at the district office of their church with a flier from CST. The bishop had given it to him to give to Beth. The flier described a program that CST had started that allowed students to complete their first-year classes in Phoenix over the course of two years. Beth thought, "How convenient is this, Lord? I don't have to go anywhere. Just drive into Phoenix." At this point, she decided to go to seminary. She

talked to her conference's CST representative, and her life story paralleled Beth's. So, Beth applied and was accepted. Then she asked, "How can I pay for this?" She applied for a scholarship and received \$6,000 more than she needed.

In response to the questions, "Why did you choose to attend a theological school (CST) or pursue a theological degree at this time in your life? Why now and not earlier?" Beth wrote, "I honestly don't feel I would have been spiritually ready to pursue the M.Div. or a career in ministry at an earlier point in my life. It was more important to me at that time to raise my children, provide for my family and be the best employee I could possibly be. Since answering God's call, as I look back on my life, I believe everything I've done and every situation I've been placed in has prepared me for this moment in my life . . . so I can devote the rest of my life to serving God by serving others."

In terms of her goal in attending theological school, Beth wrote, "My goal is to get the best theological education I can in order to be the best pastor I can. I'm old enough that I could apply to my conference and become a Local Pastor, but I don't feel academically equipped to serve a church community based upon what I know now. I want to know more—about God, about the church, about theology, about spiritual formation and spirituality—before I will feel like I'm able to minister to others." She also wanted to become an ordained elder so she would be guaranteed a ministerial appointment and thus, guaranteed an income.

## Myfanwy Maitland

After high school, Myfanwy joined the Air Force, married, "went to Community College (twice)," and got divorced. "I spent two years partying, living a rock-n-

roll/bohemian lifestyle, discovered I was pregnant after leaving Venice Beach, had a baby and was a single mom for three years." For ten years, she worked at a government job as "an administrative-type in the scientific arena." She also found and married her daughter's father, had another daughter, and divorced again. Five years later, she met and lived with a man for five months, "got pregnant and had a son." She left her government job and worked in retail, then again in the "administrative arena at a municipal airport." She had always wanted to go back to school, so at the age of 42, she started part time. The next year, she started going full time, while shifting to part-time work at the airport. "I started out in the Applied Psychology program. However, when I took a class that met a cultural awareness requirement, I recalled all my interest in cultures and religions both ancient and contemporary. I switched to a major in religious studies with a minor in anthropology as soon as possible. I really had no idea when I graduated in 2003 what I was going to do with it." Before she graduated, she left her airport job in order to "accommodate school scheduling." She ended up working in fast food, telemarketing, and as an elementary school teacher's aide. After graduating, she found a position as a church secretary. Seven months later, she "received a large raise and a title change to 'Office Manager."

"I have always known God and have thought about ordination off and on for years—approached it, run from it; repeated the cycle in different ways, including seeking fulfillment in non-Christian traditions, only to find that no matter what, Jesus was walking beside me. When I went to a large spiritual formation event, I had the sudden and absolutely sure experience of knowing that I was called to ordination. What I could

not tell then was why I was Called to be ordained, what I was called to do, specifically."

Myfanwy added, "I'm not sure I could say I specifically 'chose' to pursue the degree in theology; rather, it seems to have chosen me." For her, "discovering where I'm going and what I'm about has been an adventure leading to a surprise—me in theological school!"

In response to the questions, "What is your goal in attending CST? What do you want to get from your time at CST?" Myfanwy responded, "Of course, the most pragmatic of my goals is to learn to do something I love that will also earn some kind of living for me. However, my real goal is to gain knowledge and a sense of credibility as I learn where I am being called to serve. I want to graduate from CST with some knowledge of the specific texts and writers who have travelled this road before, and to be able to apply that knowledge to real-life contemporary experiences."

#### **Pauline**

Pauline went to college following high school and studied English and psychology, "intending to teach." She married after she graduated from college, "and then, for the next several years, when my husband was going to school, I did a variety of different jobs. I worked as an accountant for a period of time. I worked . . . for a non-profit, March of Dimes. I worked in political campaigns." Her husband also worked while he was going to school, "so it was sort of a team effort." When she had her daughter, "I stopped working for pay and became a volunteer. And so, then, during the duration of her growing up, I stayed at home with her, did the volunteer route." She "didn't teach in a high school, which is what my degree was in," but "I have always taught as a volunteer."

When her daughter "graduated from high school, that was the point at which I thought to myself, 'I want to be thoughtful about the next step. And I want to look at the things that I've done, and pick the things I think I've done well, and continue doing that, but in a way that, at this point in my life, has significance." When she looked at her volunteer work, "a significant portion of it had to do with teaching in my church community. And if I looked at where I thought I had a natural gift, it was in the teaching. . . I had the ability to take the gospel and translate it into everyday life. Especially for children." This teaching in her church community was something that she enjoyed doing, "and that I've been validated in doing. And it's very natural for me to do that." So, she thought, "I wanta do something with that." She had also had an ongoing interest in psychology, continuing to study it, "because I find it so interesting. And, it just always was amazing to me how theology" and psychology "walk hand in hand." So, that was another part of her decision-making, as "I thought that I could teach young people, not only the gospel in the context of the gospel, which is very interesting and valuable, but in the context of their lives. How can this help you with the struggle you are going through? .... I can know what adolescents face. So, through teaching, I can help them understand how, both theologically and psychologically, they can grow. So I think all of those things sort of came together."

Before she really starting considering "going back for a graduate degree," she took a few courses at a school run by her denomination. "This was just after my daughter graduated. I thought, *Oh, this sounds interesting*." It was interesting, but it was a long drive to the school, and, "I thought, *This is not practical. I'm not going to be doing this.*"

She had visited a friend at CST, which made her aware of the school and its programs, so "as my thoughts turned to ministry, CST was one of a few campuses I visited and investigated." Another place she checked out was Azusa Pacific University "But, for whatever reason, it just was clear to me that this is where I wanted to be. And it was less conscious, than just sort of a following a lead that I couldn't identify." She adds that "it seems as if I did not pick it, it picked me." The process of coming to CST "happened almost by itself, and it felt very right."

In terms of Pauline's goals when she came to CST, "My intentions for theological graduate work were to learn to listen to the gospel and others with both heart and mind, to learn to speak the gospel with integrity and authority, and to live the gospel with humility and purpose." For her, the gospel was the New Testament and, especially, the words of Jesus. When she came to seminary, "I thought that I needed to hear the gospel better."

She also felt that she needed to hear other people better and really see them.

# **Nancy**

Nancy lost her mother when she was eighteen years old and just beginning college. Three years later she moved across the country to finish school, and three years after she graduated, she married. She did not really grieve her mother's death until she was thirty-five. Meanwhile, she worked as a photojournalist, and, at the age of forty-two, she got divorced, won a Pulitzer Prize, and moved to Los Angeles. When she was fifty-three, her sister died from cancer, and the next year, Nancy was laid off from a career that had spanned twenty-five years.

In her application essay for CST, Nancy wrote, "My story would not be in front of

you if my sister had survived ovarian cancer. But her death transformed me. I lived with her for the last six months of her life." In August 2005, Nancy journeyed across the country to take care of her sister, Betsy, after a surgery. "She had been fighting ovarian cancer for four years. The surgeon's news was bad. He could not remove any of the cancer in fear of killing her. She decided against more chemotherapy because she wanted live out her final days to the fullest." Their mother had died alone in a hospital room from breast cancer. Betsy did not have a husband or children, just two sisters, and Nancy was the one who was closest to her. "I made a pact with myself that if I did anything right in my life, it would be to care for my sister as she died." No one asked how much longer Betsy would live. Nancy thought it would be two months at the most.

"Betsy and I always had a very close bond, but living in her tiny condo tested both of us." They had different personalities and patterns of living. "What's more, for the first time in my life I was nursing someone and managing multiple medications. I was worried sick that I would do something wrong and cause my sister more suffering."

Caring for her dying sister and living with her in a small space "was a very difficult adjustment" for Nancy. After one month, she was tense and exhausted. A friend had sent a book by Carolyn Myss—the same book she had received three times when she had breast cancer. This time, she read it. The book contained a "chakra meditation." As a way to help her live with her sister, Nancy decided to commit herself to meditating in the morning using Myss's meditation. "That hour of solitude at the beginning of the day became my emotional and spiritual sustenance—it calmed me and allowed me to live gracefully in her [Betsy's] realm." One morning in the early fall, "I was sitting there,

doing my meditation, eyes shut, and Jesus' face just sort of passes through my vision, with my eyes shut. And I didn't think a lot of it; I just really thought, 'Oh, there's Jesus.'"

Jesus did not say anything; he was just there, and Nancy did not think any more of it.

Around Thanksgiving time, Nancy realized that she needed to prepare for Christmas. Nancy hated everything about Christmas, while Betsy loved everything about Christmas. "So, it's Thanksgiving time, and I'm beginning to realize, oh, my God, this is Betsy's last Christmas, and I am the one who's going to be responsible for putting it on for her. And that was very depressing for me. Then, she started feeling really badly. And I'm like, oh, my God, is she gonna die?" Observing that the two sisters were both down, the hospice nurse sent her Methodist pastor to visit.

The pastor came, and after some conversation, Betsy went to bed. The pastor asked Nancy "about my life, and I began to tell him about my family, my own experience with breast cancer and my spiritual life through my sixteen-year yoga practice and recent meditation. Then, without notice, without any emotional build-up, I felt thrown to my knees. Sobbing, I asked Christ into my heart." The pastor "put his hands on my shoulders and prayed. I have no idea how long I was on the floor, but afterward I felt a complete unburdening. I felt comfort, relief and a warm, deep sense of love." Nancy called this her "born-again experience." Initially, she felt confused by the experience and did not know what to do or what to think, so she did not tell her sister or the hospice chaplain about it. But the following Sunday, Betsy wanted to go to church, so they went to the Methodist pastor's church. When he greeted them, he asked Nancy if she would share with the congregation what had happened during his visit. She said, no, she was not ready. But as

the pastor began preaching, Nancy realized why he wanted her to share her story—it would perfectly illuminate his sermon. "So, in a kind of cheaty way I say to myself, 'Ok, if he stops in the middle of his sermon and asks you to come up and tell your story, you'll do it." She never thought that would happen, but it did: "Well, he stopped, in the middle of his sermon, and he said, 'Are you sure you wouldn't come up and tell your story?' . . . I went up there; I told my story; I sobbed; the congregation sobbed; people clapped; and my sister's like, 'Say what?'"

On the day Betsy was to be cremated, Nancy and her other sister experienced Betsy's spirit after a yoga session. About a week later, Nancy had done some yoga and lain down to meditate when she had an experience of Betsy and Jesus appearing: "They knelt beside me and dried my tears. I felt my sadness melt away and I was revived." After returning home following her sister's death, Nancy looked for and found a church. She "was hungry to find out, 'Who is Jesus? What happened to me? What is Christianity?" It was clear to her that she was now a Christian.

Back at work for the *LA Times*, Nancy became increasingly unhappy. "People were being laid off; the people who bought the paper were awful human beings, and it was conflicting with this person that I wanted to become. I was beginning to feel, like, just a different sense of values, and value to my life. So I was very unhappy, but not knowing what in the world was I gonna do." Then she heard a radio interview with a female chaplain for the Maine Game Warden. "Her story of love and compassion stuck with me for days and I finally asked myself, 'Why? Why is this story coming back over and over again?' My answer was, 'You could do what this woman does. You would like

to do what this woman does.' Instantly my soul shifted—a puzzle piece fell into place."

Nancy thought to herself, "Ohhh, this is what you want me to do next. You want me to be a chaplain. All right!" So, at that moment, Nancy decided she would become a chaplain. She thought about what her sister's hospice chaplain had done and realized she could do the same work. She did some research and talked to some people and found out that she needed an M.Div. in order to be a chaplain. Interestingly, "I'd been reading the Bible with some friends at church, and I had said so many times, 'Wouldn't it be cool to go to seminary, where you could study all that?""

Nancy researched several theological schools. She found CST attractive because she could focus on pastoral care and counseling within her M.Div. program, and CST's ecumenical, interfaith, and multicultural approaches would serve her well as a chaplain. After she was laid off from her job, Nancy went to talk to the head of the Spiritual Care Department at Children's Hospital about CST (because the head was an alumna) and about becoming a chaplain. She asked her about getting some sort of work at the hospital. The woman invited her to take the next Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) course at the hospital, which she did. It was a "remarkable experience" for her that confirmed that chaplaincy was for her. Not everyone can be with dying and dead people, but she realized she could. "I frequently had said, too, long before this, that in my next life, I was gonna be the nice person in the hospital that tells you what's really gonna happen." People come in to hospitals and are scared because they do not know what to anticipate. Through her studies at CST, Nancy was preparing to be "the nice person in the hospital."

After high school, CJ went to school and got married. While she was raising her children, "I worked part time and went to school part time (I'm a student more than anything!). I divorced in the middle of childrearing—my daughters were seven and nine at that point. I worked full time as an English as a Second Language teacher after my youngest began kindergarten." She decided to get "an MA in curriculum and instruction to help increase my earning potential, and to learn more about teaching. Some kids are able to learn and succeed in the midst of horrible situations, and some, more comfortable, fail miserably—I was looking for the silver bullet, and have come to believe there are none, no exterior ones anyway." As she was working and raising her daughters, she remarried and gained what she called "gift children."

CJ said, "I have always wanted to be a pastor." Her life "has always been very involved with the church." Yet, when she was in elementary school, her pastor "told me I couldn't be a minister because of my gender. I again planned to go into ministry in high school, before I went to Argentina as an exchange student for a year." Some of the missionaries she encountered there "showed me a manipulative, less-than-humble side to faith and religion." She had not been sheltered from this side before, but in the context of the poverty and the Catholicism of the country, "I was faced with a side of the church I didn't like." When she came home, she sensed that something was going on between the pastor and some of the girls in the youth group. She "confronted the pastor about it, and was told that I needed to mind my own business. All of a sudden, church seemed self-serving and dirty, and it wasn't hard to lose the habit in favor of a job with Sunday

hours." Fifteen years later, it was revealed that the pastor had been sexually abusing the girls. "Several other times in young adulthood I felt called to be a pastor, but faced various obstacles. One of them was right after my divorce, and the pastor of [a United Methodist Church] suggested that I needed to work on my 'blended family' at that point."

After earning her master's degree, CJ "worked for a very inspiring principal who brought in shared decision making, and with his example, I believed I could help teachers and students if I went into admin." While she was completing her administration credential, public "schools began to take on a more business-like model, and I believe the students and their needs got lost. I became pretty disheartened with it, and though many of my co-workers and teachers gave me great reviews, I felt less comfortable as a leader in that system."

At that point, her last child had gone off to college, "fledged," and "my husband and I are looking at the second half of our lives, thinking, 'This is nice." Then she realized that there was one thing left that she wanted to do. "I returned to teaching for two years to earn a retirement pension and then started seminary." Pursuing a "second career" as a local church minister fulfilled her lifelong desire. "I really love the worship experience," CJ said. "Looking back, the decision to go to seminary after the kids were grown felt like the first really free-of-other-constraints decision I've ever made."

# **Closing Reflections**

These narratives have been arranged in order by the age at which each woman began attending CST or ETSC, beginning with the youngest. The stories are as varied as

the women themselves. Several of the women went back and forth in time to share their stories. Being a linear thinker, I sought to put events in temporal order. This may have resulted in misrepresenting or distorting these women's stories and experiences and the meanings they had made of them. In other words, the narratives I formed may have placed emphasis where the subjects would not have. However, I have done my best to represent the women and their journeys in a fashion that is faithful to what they shared with me and to the ways in which they shared their stories.

In her study, Apter found that women in their fifties tend to have reached a point where they have their own self-perceptions and judgments and are not as easily influenced by the judgments and views of others as they once were. As they gain self-confidence and self-knowledge, they feel empowered, and "the disapproval of others loses the meaning it once had." This self-confidence and lack of worry over what others might think was evident in the willingness of many of the participants to allow me to not only share their stories, but to include information by which they might be identified in the small communities of CST and ETSC. In responding to my request to include her story, one woman revealed this 50-something attitude: "By the timing of my educational pursuits and the title, someone could theoretically figure out who it is. However, I'm actually not too worried about being identified. Life is life, so to speak."

Storytelling, by its nature, is interpretive. When the women shared with me their stories, they made decisions about what to leave out and what to include. They highlighted particular events and aspects of those events and minimized others. In addition, some women were closer to the time they had decided to attend theological

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Apter, 75.

school than others. Four women were completing their first year of studies, while three others had begun studying at CST five school years earlier. Thus, some women found it easier than others to remember why they chose to attend seminary and the events leading up to that decision. In addition, time and further experiences and reflections certainly modified how the women told their stories, what they included, and the interpretations they applied to their experiences. For example, to explain the nature of her call, Bonnie shared with me spiritual experiences she had during her first semester at CST. Julie, feeling that her original conscious reasons for attending theological school were inadequate, added the additional reflection that she had been internally motivated by a desire for personal growth.

Slee, in describing women's use of narrative in her study, notes that stories can "fossilise into unreflective, rigid forms" as a result of repeated telling in a variety of contexts, thereby losing "the spontaneity and vividness which is characteristic of story in its original telling." 5 She found this "more rigid and rehearsed use of story" to be particularly apparent with "women clergy or others who had been required through formal processes of selection or training to tell their faith stories on successive occasions over a number of years, often to those in authority with the power to thwart or sanction."6 Some of the statements and stories I heard had this rehearsed quality to them. The use of the language of "call" appeared in the majority of the women's stories. For most of them, "call" language seemed to come naturally or was an authentic way of speaking about their experience. For some, though, it seemed to be a word added into their narratives,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Slee, 68. <sup>6</sup> Slee, 68.

most likely because they needed to speak of their sense of "call" to satisfy ordination requirements and denominational authorities. In all cases, "call" functioned as a religious code that provided a short answer to the question about why the participant chose to attend seminary. However, the use of the word "call" did not begin to signify the meaningful experiences and spiritual processes that lay behind this decision. To uncover these, I usually had to ask questions designed to elicit details about the nature of the "call." These additional details facilitated the discernment of the themes that will be described and elucidated in Chapter 4.

## **CHAPTER 4**

Themes in Women's Journeys to Theological School

Chapter 3 depicted the journeys of several midlife women from high school to Claremont School of Theology (CST) or the Episcopal Theological School at Claremont (ETSC). In this chapter, I will begin by summarizing some of the various paths and experiences that characterized my study participants' adult lives. (The nature of the women's previous studies in higher education, their work backgrounds, and the time gaps between their higher education experiences will be shared in Chapter 5.) Next, I will examine the aspects of the participants' journeys most directly related to the decision to attend seminary. I will describe and discuss the phenomenon of deciding to attend theological school as a midlife woman in terms of the themes that I found in the research participants' stories. Finally, I will analyze these themes and the women's experiences in relation to literature on midlife and women's development.

## Life Paths

The stories told in Chapter 3 pointed to the variety of life paths among my research participants before they began attending theological school. A few were career women who had never had children, while a couple had followed the traditional route of staying home to raise their children. However, even the latter two women had been active volunteers in their church communities. Many of the women had worked and raised children simultaneously; at least seven were single mothers at some point in their lives. Four mentioned being divorced twice, and four others indicated they were divorced once. A few women had worked in order to support their families while their husbands pursued

additional education. Several participants married men who were manipulative, abusive, or alcoholics. One woman stated that, after marrying one man, she "discovered I'd married a criminal neo-Nazi drug addict."

This brief synopsis reveals that, in general, the midlife women who participated in my study had led active, eventful lives before beginning theological school. Many had experienced unhealthy and broken relationships with intimate partners. Several women had struggled, at least temporarily, to support and raise children as single mothers. All the women had engaged in paid worked at some point in their adult lives.

# Themes in Journeys to Theological School

In this part of the chapter, I will begin to answer the research question, "What brings midlife women to theological school?" As I have read and re-read the participants' narratives of how they came to CST and ETSC, I have looked for the dominant, most meaningful elements characterizing these journeys. With each narrative, I have asked, "What caused this woman to decide to go to theological school? What was the nature of her decision-making experience?" To answer these questions, I have sought to read between the lines and to use my intuition and my knowledge of the women and their stories. My discoveries led to the creation of four major themes or categories of meaning that capture midlife women's experiences of deciding to attend theological school: (1) A woman believes that she has been called to a form of ministry that requires a seminary education. (2) Going to theological school is an expression of a desire for learning, growth, or a role as a minister or spiritual leader. (3) A midlife woman seeks to do something more meaningful and significant with her life and or something that better

uses her gifts and talents. (4) Deciding to go to seminary in midlife is connected to timing and the right confluence of events. These themes form the structure of this chapter division, and each theme will be elucidated with examples from the participants' narratives.

I have referred to the phenomenon of deciding to attend theological school as a "journey." This language is designed to reflect the common experience that various experiences and factors played roles in each participant's decision to go to seminary.

Making the decision was a process. Sometimes it was a process in which various pieces just seemed to fall into place or come along serendipitously, contributing to a belief that God was in charge of the process and was leading the person in a particular direction.

Some women spent considerable time weighing various elements, thinking, reflecting, talking with others, and praying. Therefore, it must be kept in mind that naming one or two themes in a woman's decision-making process cannot fully capture the journey she took in making this decision.

# Being Called

The majority of the participants in my study spoke of having experienced or come to believe they had "a call" to ministry. How that happened and the factors involved varied from person to person. For some, it was a process of discernment and gradual realization. For others, the sense of call was immediate, but even in those cases, the call was strengthened or clarified by additional reflection and affirmations from other people. To understand what it meant to the participants to be "called," this section will look at the various ways in which these women came to know they had "a call."

Anne had had a lifelong interest in religion and spirituality. As she engaged in practices to develop her own faith and spirituality, she realized that her previous work with homeless people—sitting with them and listening to them—had been a form of prayer for her. Thus, it was important to her to engage in work that served the marginalized in society, and she felt called to that kind of work. When she heard that the role of a deacon in her denomination is to be "a bridge between the church and the world," she knew that was what she wanted to do. She began talking to people at her church and started the discernment process toward becoming a deacon. Similarly, Altheia's two years of service in the Peace Corps "were critically influential" in the journey that led up to her feeling called to go into the ministry and to seminary.

For other participants, their experiences with various forms of church ministry and religious leadership were integral to their coming to a sense of call. Preaching in her home congregation for the first time was what put Elise on the path to seminary. She had been involved in church leadership and service in many ways over the years, but when she stepped in to take the place of her pastor one Sunday, she found preaching to be an amazing, powerful, fulfilling, and exciting experience. After she preached, many people came up to her and told her she had missed her calling. This led her to begin contemplating whether she should go into ministry. She talked with her pastor about the experience and about the idea of calling, and she thought about her sense of call for "quite awhile." She eventually decided to pursue both ordained and lay ministry. The lay ministry track included training to be a lay speaker. By the time she completed that training, she knew that she was called to ordained ministry.

When Beth was asked to direct a street ministry targeting poor and at-risk children, she immersed herself in the work. Soon, she began feeling like she wanted to do more. She had already been active in her church for almost twenty years—teaching Sunday school, serving on committees, singing in the choir. But then she started looking at the possibility of devoting more of her life to ministry. She began taking the required courses to be a lay speaker in the United Methodist Church. During one course, she was asked to share her call story. Up until that point, she had not thought of herself as pursuing a "call," so she just shared why she was doing the lay speaker coursework. Following that, a man passed her a piece of paper with the words written on it, "It is a call." This opened her up to the idea that she was indeed called. Continuing on with her education, she became a certified lay speaker, and then her district superintendent recommended that she pursue full ordination. When doing so seemed like a possibility in terms of retirement and income, she met with her pastor, who gave her a book to read. Reading the book confirmed for her that she was meant to be a minister. She went back to her pastor, who gave her a denominational workbook that helps people discern exactly what their call is. This led her to look back over her life and realize that she had an ongoing interest in religion and service. By the time she was done with the workbook, she felt even more strongly that she wanted to become an ordained minister.

Like Beth, Martha had come to a sense of call gradually through her involvement in church leadership. As first a volunteer and then as a paid staff person involved with children's education and ministry, she had worked with over seven different youth directors who were students at CST. Having observed them as they journeyed through

their programs, she began thinking, "Maybe I should do that." Later, as she was asked to participate more and more in worship leadership, she came to a clearer sense of having a call and what that call was. She shared, "Liturgy, and participation in worship, is really important to me. So that really worked, I think, to help solidify my understanding of my call." Her call was additionally "sharpened as several [church] members encouraged me to consider the seminary program at CST" and to explore the ministry.

Before she began considering ordained ministry, Jackie participated in an urban ministries training program and then was hired to coordinate the urban ministry work of a group of pastors. As she was engaged in this work, Jackie attended her first annual conference. During a worship service at this conference, Jackie was literally moved to respond to what she said was "sort of an altar call." The bishop invited anyone who felt a call to come to the front. Despite the fact that she was "up in the balcony and way in the back," Jackie felt she had to go down and be prayed for. She was compelled by the Holy Spirit to act, even though she did not know why or what sort of call she had. When she was asked what she wanted to be prayed for, she could not speak, only cry. Afterward, some of the pastors she had been working with came up to her and affirmed her call. She held on to this experience and began paying closer attention to these pastors and the ministries in which they engaged. She watched them, asked questions, listened, studied, and prayed. As she began thinking about pursuing ordained ministry, images came to her in which she saw herself offering the Eucharistic table to people in unconventional places. This confirmed her sense of call.

Like Jackie, several other women had mystical experiences that gave them a sense

of having a call and needing to go to theological school. A range of meanings is associated with the word, *mystical*, but I am using it here to describe experiences in which participants felt they were influenced by the Divine in some direct and extraordinary way. Natalie felt a call to be a lay leader in the middle of the night, just before her thirtieth birthday. She wrote, "I felt paralyzed by an overwhelming feeling of the Holy Spirit entering my heart." She knew that her life had been changed in that moment and that she had received a spiritual gift that would empower her in a ministry of lay leadership. She connected this experience with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as described in the book of Acts.

God frequently spoke to Jane through an internal voice of guidance and wisdom.

One Sunday, she heard that internal voice tell her that being a minister was "your job."

This opened up for her the possibility of becoming a clergyperson. Myfanwy had

"thought about ordination off and on for years," but had never committed to pursuing theological education until she attended a spiritual formation event and had "the sudden and absolutely sure experience of knowing" that she was called to ordination.

Sierra had a similar mystical experience of just knowing what she was called to do. One Sunday, as she watched her female pastor bless the bread and the wine and prepare to serve it, she had the sudden strong sense that that was what she wanted to do. Indeed, she felt that she *had* to and *needed* to do what the pastor was doing. She had to go to seminary so she could prepare to provide sacramental leadership. Sierra described this experience of knowing as a "mystical, spiritual thing." Her sense of call was confirmed when she shared with her partner that she wanted to become a minister. Her partner had

already seen that this was the direction Sierra needed to head, and she did not hesitate to put things in motion for Sierra. She asked their pastor where Sierra should go to seminary and then called CST to get more information. Sierra was not ready to act so quickly, but her partner's initiative and support encouraged her to apply to CST right away.

Nancy shared her story of being called as if it was like putting a puzzle together. Each piece was connected to the piece that came before it. She had nursed her sister through the last few months of her life and had some life-changing mystical experiences during that time and immediately following her sister's death. After returning to work, she found herself increasingly unhappy with the way things were in that environment. Her sense of values had shifted, but she had no idea what she wanted to do. Then she heard a radio interview with a female chaplain for the Maine Game Warden. This woman's story stuck with her for days until she asked herself why it kept coming back to her over and over. The answer she heard within herself was, "You could do what this woman does. You would like to do what this woman does." A "puzzle piece fell into place," and she knew that becoming a chaplain was also what God wanted her to do. She felt she had been called to a new career.

Although Anne had already decided to become a deacon, a sense of being called to serve the Eucharist led her to switch to pursuing ordination as a priest. She had just put the letter in the mail to apply to be a deacon when she "started having these sacramental callings." She began feeling really drawn to serving the Eucharist, but, as she knew, it is the priest's call that is "about sacrament." So, she prayed, "God, if this is what you want, then there is going to be another way, 'cause I'm not gonna bring this conversation up."

One day, she was talking with a friend about what it would be like to be a priest, and "I started feeling that, like, in a very intense way." She felt in her hands what it would be like to serve the Eucharist. She remembered that the idea of "what it meant for Jesus to eat with people considered unclean" was one of the reasons she became a Christian. She was still struggling with what this sense of calling to sacrament meant for her when she met with the bishop responsible to the deacons. At that time, her senior ward asked the bishop, "If [Anne] feels called to be a priest, then what happens?" Anne shared, "This really came out of the blue; I had not talked to her about this. And he said, 'If you don't feel called to be in a parish, then you should go back and discern some more." Anne went back to her priest and said, "I think he's right." They called her discernment group together, and the group helped her work through what it would mean to get an M.Div. and become a priest. The next time she appeared before the bishop, he said, "I want you to start school right away."

Sometimes, connections with other people and the work of the Spirit through those people was the beginning point for discerning a call. For Ray, meeting a CST professor at a weeklong workshop for women was the entry point to discerning a call to theological school. Feeling drawn to this person, Ray arranged to have lunch with her in Claremont. In talking with the professor, Ray shared with her why she had left her last corporate position: "God was nudging me. And I told her that I really had a heart for women in crisis and underserved children." Ray proceeded to ask the professor about the professor's call and how she knew it was a call, and Ray shared her experience of God and how she and God conversed. The professor said, "'Well, maybe God's talking to

you," and she encouraged Ray to check out the CST Visit Day that was happening as they spoke. "Then," Ray shared, "I started to cry. And then I knew, ok, it's definitely, this is, must be where I'm supposed to be." Ray joined the Visit Day activities and came back for a second Visit Day "to experience the whole thing." During her second visit, she went to the Biblical Meditation Garden on campus and talked to God:

I said, "Ok, God, is this what you're tellin' me?" Because I had applied for some jobs that I was qualified for or marginally qualified for, or over-qualified for, and nothing was clicking. It's like, "God, is this what you're calling me to do?"

As she explored applying to CST, Ray decided that, since she felt called to serve but not to preach, becoming a chaplain was "a happy medium." Supporting this decision was an experience she had had when she was looking for work:

I was sitting in my car, and God's only spoken to me twice like this, maybe three times. Three times. He said to me, 'Children's Hospital.' And I'm like—there's nobody in the car. That's not the subject on the radio. 'Children's Hospital.' Yeah, right. I laughed.

At the time, she could not envision, with her background and training, what kind of work she might do at a hospital. "Well, come to find out, there is a place for me at Children's Hospital," she concluded.

Momma G's journey to feeling called to chaplaincy work, ordination, and thus, theological education was circuitous in nature. She wrote, "After the death of my infant niece in 2003, I began to sense that I was called to do something else." She had never liked her career, and she knew she could not physically continue doing the same work for much longer. A "funeral celebrant" had done the memorial service for her niece, and "it was the most comforting and spirit-filled service. It was fabulous." Momma G "realized that I could offer comfort and spiritual care to other grieving and bereaved families," so

she started investigating what it would take to be a funeral celebrant. "It's a weekend course," she said. "Well, I think you need more than a weekend course to be in someone's life at that point." Therefore, she proceeded to investigate other career options, "from nursing to counseling." She knew God had gifted her with a comforting presence and healing compassion. Eventually, a friend suggested that she consider going to CST. Several times over the previous ten years, members of Momma G's congregation had asked her when she would be going to seminary, and, "I always said, 'Never,' thinking that seminary was for those who wanted to be in parish ministry." She did not want to be a pastor or a preacher, but she came to realize "that God was calling me to ministry as an end-of-life spiritual care-giver." This call was affirmed as she researched attending CST:

The day I was looking on the Claremont website, just to check out classes, I had this . . . clear vision of bricks swirling around my head, like in cartoons, you know, when the little stars go by? And those bricks just laid down [she set her hands down, one after the other, in a line] in this path. And God was saying again, "Here's your path." And the cool thing was that I looked at that and I thought, This is a brick, solid, path. So I know that if God is setting me on this path, I am not walkin' it alone. So that was just so much assurance that, "Here you go. You've been looking and you've been searching, and here it is." It was really cool. That's my call story.

These synopses of call stories reveal that are several ways in which midlife women come to believe they have a call to ministry and theological education. A sense of call may emerge from experiences with service and church ministry and leadership; from mystical experiences; from reading, reflection, study, and prayer; from affirmations and encouragement from others; and from conversations with key people. Often, several of these elements come together to illuminate and confirm a call.

### Pursuing the Heart's Desire

Many of the participants' call stories suggest that the experience of being called is about becoming aware of or acknowledging what one really wants to do—what one's real desire is—and receiving affirmation that this is what God wants one to do or that it is what one is meant to do. These desires might be to engage in service, religious leadership, academic learning, or skill development and were evident in the participants' lives before they experienced their calls. For example, Jane recalled an early childhood experience of "going up to the altar and getting this sense of being a missionary." While she dropped the idea at the time, her experience of being called to ordained ministry as a midlife adult connected back to the desire she experienced as a child.

As I noted in the previous section, Myfanwy had considered ordained ministry for several years before she had the experience of being called to it. Her life story speaks to a long-time interest in religion and a search to find a meaningful spirituality:

My spiritual life has been adventurous. I've made pit-stops in Unitarian, Unity and various Methodist and Lutheran churches. I've woven my Path through Kabbalah, Mysticism, Wicca and undifferentiated Paganism. I've visited Druidism and Buddhism; New Age and New Thought. I have known Jesus all along the erstwhile Paths. I love the concepts of the Buddha, Sarasvati, and Kwan Yin. I have respected the image of the Hindu goddess Kali-Ma and embraced the feminist inspiration she brings to Western thought.

Throughout my spiritual and spatial travels, I discovered similarities in all religions. It became a passion to seek and find that which runs through them all.

Similarly, while Anne felt a strong sense of call to service in the world and to sacramental ministry, she had also had a lifelong interest in spirituality and religion. She had wanted to "understand what was most important to people," that is, what goes on within people in relation to their faith and spirituality. This interest and passion formed a

foundation for her journey toward her call. Yet, without this sense of call to ordained ministry, she might not have chosen to attend theological school.

Like Anne and Myfanwy, Martha had majored in religious studies in college.

However, a degree in religious studies does not prepare one to provide church leadership.

As the person in charge of children's ministries for her congregation, Martha had found that she did not know as much as she would have liked. Witnessing what CST students brought to the life of her congregation, she had felt a desire to gain more skills and knowledge for the work she was doing. In a similar vein, Elise noted that part of the reason for her decision to attend seminary had been, "I felt that I needed more preparation to enter ministry than the [Methodist] licensing school. Moreover, I recognized a certain academic side to myself that would respond to grad school."

Many years before Sierra had her mystical experience of knowing that she was called to serve communion and needed to go to seminary, she had begun to engage in theological studies. While attending an evangelical-charismatic-type church, she was turned off by the lack of opportunity for women in that tradition, so she began doing research on her own and was referred to some feminist Christian authors by women friends from church. She felt liberated by what she read as she gained new perspectives on scripture and church history and found new images for God that were not patriarchal. However, it was not enough to study on her own. One of the reasons she felt she needed to attend seminary was to gain more than what she could through books. Like Sierra, Natalie had a mystical experience of being called to church leadership that was closely tied to a desire to learn more. She wanted to understand her faith better so she could

explain it others, but she was not learning enough through her church community.

Theological school was a way to gain the education she sought.

As the daughter of a socially and politically active preacher, Bonnie had known for a long time that she was "called to proclaim the gospel," and she understood "that civil rights and political action and social justice is in my blood." But it took a sermon that disturbed her and disrupted her sense of comfort to lead her to accept her call and make the "decision that I was gonna go for the dreams I'd never ever thought of going for." She "wanted to learn about the Bible in a scholarly way," and she "wanted to know what God's words said." Bonnie's desire to pursue graduate studies that would teach her how to critically and faithfully study the Bible merged with her sense of call to justice work into a desire to engage in pastoral counseling ministry in socio-economically marginalized communities. Thus, for Bonnie, dream, desire, and call were intertwined.

Nancy had foreshadowed her call with her own words. Based on her own and her sister's experiences with cancer, she had frequently said "that in my next life, I was gonna be the nice person in the hospital that tells you what's really gonna happen." As a chaplain, she would be able to be that person. In addition, while studying the Bible with friends, she "had said so many times, "Wouldn't it be cool to go to seminary, where you could study all that?" To become a chaplain, she had to go to seminary.

Other women did not necessarily use the language of "call," but they came to seminary with the aim of having ministerial careers. CJ had wanted to be a pastor since she was in elementary school, but then and at several other points in her life she felt discouraged from pursuing this career goal. Nonetheless, she was very involved with

church throughout her life. With her children off on their own and retirement only two years away, she decided to pursue her lifelong desire and go to seminary. Hannah had decided that she wanted to go to theological school when her husband chose to become a pastor. The connection she had with him led her to feel that she wanted to be involved in church ministry as well. She said, "I can't think separate from my husband. So, I always walk with him and think together with him." When he became a pastor, she would inevitably be involved in his work. But she did not want to "work as the pastor's wife." Going to seminary meant that she could have her own position and authority separate from her husband.

Kathleen had wanted to be a nun when she was a child. Growing up, it was really important to her to be involved in her church and understand its workings. Once she joined a Unitarian Universalist church, she became very involved, doing "virtually everything in the church." Her interest in being active in church polity was reawakened by a talk given by Rebecca Parker, the president of the Starr King School for the Ministry. At the time, she had not finished a bachelor's degree, so she pushed the idea of going to seminary to the back of her mind. When she began considering doing a master's degree, she again dismissed the idea of seminary, because she thought it meant going to Starr King, the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley. She shared, "The thought of going to Berkeley was so frightening and foreign." Later, while preparing a sermon, Kathleen read a book co-authored by Parker, and it all came together for her: she realized that she was ready to go to seminary and that she did not have to move to Berkeley to attend Starr King, because Parker herself was educated at CST. Besides her desire to be

involved in church leadership, Kathleen wanted to work to address institutional racism within Unitarian Universalism. Having an M.Div. would help her to do this.

While Dena had thought about going into ministry as a teenager, she did not apply to seminary with the aim of becoming a pastor or chaplain. She came to school hoping to earn a theological degree, not knowing what she would do with it. She liked "talking about God and thinking about God," and she wanted to learn how to do that better. She had been actively involved in a church and had served as a de facto chaplain for people on her TV crew. Continuing in that role, she had presided over a co-worker's funeral, which turned out to be a significant spiritual experience that led to her decision to apply to seminary.

Julie's and Vicky's journeys to theological school were quite different from the other study participants' journeys. The desire leading Vicky to seminary was one of escaping "idleness" and engaging in activities she enjoyed—studying and learning. She even joked about going to school as being a "fancy hobby" for her. In addition, in her studies of law and human resource management, Vicky had found a lack of attention to individual human psychology. She thought that by focusing on spiritual care and counseling at CST she might learn ways to prevent and more effectively address problems related to human relationships. Similarly, Julie seemed to be motivated to go to graduate school by a desire to do something other than work as a stay-at-home mother and wife. Becoming a student would give her an opportunity to practice and improve her English skills. At a deeper level, she wanted to do something for herself and engage in personal growth work.

As I listened more closely and carefully to the participants' stories, I heard desires that often stemmed back to childhood of wanting to be engaged in religious work. I heard desires to learn more about religion, theology, and spirituality and to gain skills to speak more intelligently about one's faith and to be able to lead and serve others. Behind these desires, it is possible to hear yearnings to have religious and spiritual authority or to grow in one's own spiritual life and understanding. I also noticed desires to share what has been meaningful in one's own life and to minister out of the experiences of one's own journey(s) through pain and suffering to help others through similar experiences.

#### Seeking to Do Something Different and More Meaningful

Closely tied to the theme of pursuing the heart's desire is a theme of seeking different and or more meaningful work to do. Dena shared that, before applying to seminary, she was beginning "to be dissatisfied with my career in television, even though I was quite successful. I wanted to do something that mattered and hoped to change an overindulgent life." She had started feeling a desire to simplify her life and to do something that had more value than her work in entertainment. She applied first to one and then another seminary, with the thought that she wanted to gain the tools to talk and think about God better and maybe write Christian works. Ray had left her corporate job "in search of something"—she had not known what. She had just known that she was done living her life at such an intense pace. For awhile, she "played." Eventually, she found herself talking with a CST professor about the idea of calling and sharing with her how she enjoyed working with children and desired to help women in crisis. This conversation, along with further discernment, led her to enroll in CST's program in

spiritual care and counseling.

Like Dena and Ray, Momma G and Nancy had experienced dissatisfaction with their careers. Momma G had never liked her work as a dental hygienist, but she did it for twenty years. Part of her journey to seminary was the realization that she physically and psychologically could not do this work for twenty more years. She shared, jokingly: "I knew twenty more years of doing something I didn't like was going to make me kill something or stab people, which isn't really good, in this job." Momma G's dissatisfaction with her career had led her to look into other possibilities. She had conducted her search for a new career on a foundation of having discerned what her gifts and desires were. She recognized that God had given her gifts that assisted healing in times of stress: gifts of presence, comfort, calm, and compassion. Her experience with the death of her niece had led her to realize that she "could offer comfort and spiritual care to other grieving and bereaved families." She knew what unexpected and premature deaths did to families, and she wanted to be with families at such times. Yet, she was not aware of chaplaincy as a possibility when she first began looking for a new career. She wanted more than the weekend course required for a funeral celebrant, so she looked into other options, including nursing and counseling. Counseling did not feel right, and the nurses she talked to shared the same frustrations she had experienced with her work. Finally, a friend directed her toward seminary.

Similarly, Nancy had become very unhappy with her career and her work environment after caring for her dying sister. She had found she wanted to do something that fit with the person she desired to become as a renewed or "born again" Christian,

something that also connected with her values and her sense of the value of her life.

Realizing that she really wanted to be a chaplain, she had also recognized that she had the ability to engage in work with the dying.

Vicky and Julie had wanted to do more with their lives besides staying at home and taking care of their families. As wives of international students, their options had been limited. Pursuing graduate degrees at a theological school gave them a better understanding of their husbands' careers, while also providing a venue in which to pursue some of their own desires and interests.

After her only child went to college, Pauline had determined that she would be thoughtful and intentional about the "next step" in her life. She decided she wanted to engage in activities that she knew she could do well and that, at that point in her life, had significance for her. Pauline looked back over her life at the things she had done and focused on what she had done particularly well. In this discernment process, she found she had "a natural gift" for teaching. It was something she enjoyed doing and that others had corroborated as a gift. She determined she "had the ability to take the gospel and translate it into everyday life." Her lifelong interest in psychology contributed to her discernment process, as she realized that her understanding of psychology helped her to address people's everyday concerns through her teaching. She began enrolling in seminary courses because she wanted to learn to understand scripture better, particularly the four gospels of the New Testament. She aspired to learn to "hear the gospel better" and speak and live it more fully. In addition to building her academic knowledge base,

she desired to develop her skills as an educator and work on really hearing and seeing people.

#### The Timing Was Right

A fourth major theme in these midlife women's processes of deciding to attend theological school was that the timing was right. In some cases, this timing was closely related to children's ages and stages in life, as noted in Pauline's story in the previous section. Similarly, CJ had found herself at a crossroads as her last child went off to college. She was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the way things were headed in the educational system for which she worked, and as she and her husband looked ahead to life without children in the house, she realized there was one more thing she wanted to do—become a pastor. So she taught long enough to be able to retire and enrolled in seminary. Hannah had deliberately waited until she thought her sons were "grown enough to handle themselves" before she allowed herself the freedom to go to seminary. They were in the fifth and seventh grades when she began attending CST. She had also earlier set an age at which she would go back to school. She shared that she had always told her husband that she was going to start studying for the ministry when she turned 40. She was 41 when she began.

After Martha's mother died, which she noted was around the time her youngest child started kindergarten, Martha "made a decision . . . not about what to do, but that I wouldn't just do everything that came along." She decided to be careful and selective about her volunteer commitments. She considered going back to school, but she was still really busy with her family and then her new job. As her older children left home for

college, though, she started thinking "about a career path for myself." With two less children in the house, Martha found she "had a little bit of flexibility in my schedule that I had not had in the past." Commenting on her decision to start seminary once she had only one child at home, Martha said, "The timing and everything was right at this point."

Initially, Beth had ignored the call she felt to go into ministry. At the time that her district superintendent suggested she go to seminary and pursue full ordination, it was more important to her "to raise my children, provide for my family and be the best employee I could possibly be." It was not until her second child was getting ready to go off to college that she began considering the possibility of becoming an ordained minister. At that point, she asked God to give her a sign if God wanted her to become a fully ordained minister. She received that sign in the form of a retirement statement in the mail. From there, the pieces kept falling into place. Commenting on the significance of this timing, she wrote:

I honestly don't feel I would have been spiritually ready to pursue the M.Div. or a career in ministry at an earlier point in my life. . . . Since answering God's call, as I look back on my life, I believe everything I've done and every situation I've been placed in has prepared me for this moment in my life . . . so I can devote the rest of my life to serving God by serving others.

Like Beth, Kathleen spoke about readiness for seminary and ministry as important in her journey to CST. She did not think she could have made it as a minister, especially in her tradition, when she was younger. She shared, "I need to have a good, strong, confident sense of myself before going in, or I'd just be miserable." As a midlife woman, she had more of a sense of herself and felt like she was better prepared for the challenges of working with strong-willed people in a congregational context. In response to my

question about whether she felt like she was going through a midlife crisis or transition, Kathleen shared, "Coming to graduate school was not a midlife crisis thing. It was more like, I finally got my act together. It only took twenty years, but I got my act together. That's what it felt like." The turning point for her came as she was preparing a sermon and read Rebecca Parker and Rita Brock's *Proverbs of Ashes*: "And finally, it all came together. Like, ok, . . . I'm ready—I can go back to school now."

Elise also shared that she did not think she would have been as well prepared or as effective as a minister when she was younger. As a younger woman, she had not had the life experience to help people who were in crisis, so she "didn't have anything to offer" earlier in her life. Having gone through the experiences of a miscarriage and questioning her faith and beliefs, she felt she had more to give others in the way of understanding, empathy, and insight.

For many midlife women, then, the decision to attend theological school is determined or affected by their children's ages and levels of independence, by how experiences and events come together at the right time, and by a women's sense of readiness and maturity.

#### Analysis of Themes

The ways in which the participants' stories express the themes of timing, seeking to do something different and more meaningful, and pursuing the heart's desire have several direct correlations with theories and research findings on the midlife transition and midlife development. The connections between experiencing a call to ministry and midlife growth and development are less apparent, but they are also present. The

following subsections will illuminate the correlations between the participants' journeys to theological school and midlife themes and characteristics.

#### Choosing to Do Something More Meaningful

Psychotherapists, developmental theorists, and researchers have observed that midlife is often a time of serious reflection and major life changes. People entering the midlife transition realize that half their lives are over, so they begin reflecting on what they had hoped to do with their lives, what they have actually done, and what they still want to and can do. Researchers Margie Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James note,

In our culture, midlife appears to be a time for reassessment, with possibilities for making changes. The perception seems to be that there is still time left, although there may be a sense that your choices are becoming more limited and that time will eventually run out.<sup>1</sup>

In his essay, "The Stages of Life," Jung described midlife as the zenith from which a descent begins. "The descent means the reversal of all the ideals and values that were cherished in the morning." Shellenbarger describes this zenith as a "breaking point," or

a juncture when keeping up old values, goals, and dreams no longer seems worth the effort. At this critical time, the impulses, desires, losses, and strains of midlife mount to such proportions that a woman begins, consciously or unconsciously, to depart from her old path and to leave parts of her life behind.<sup>3</sup>

For Apter, this breaking point or juncture is a crisis that calls into question old certainties about who one is and what one's aims and priorities are in life.<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Arnold, in her study of the midlife narratives of twenty-three women between 50 and 63 years old, found that, in their late forties, these women began seeking to "conduct their lives in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Lachman and James, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Jung, "Stages of Life," 397.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Shellenbarger, 38-39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Apter, 46.

ways that had essential meaning to them."5

Shellenbarger observed that a desire that arises for some women in midlife is "a thirst to do new, more meaningful work," which leads these women to jettison long-time careers and embark on new ventures. The stress of juggling career and family and trying to survive and succeed in a corporate culture can also set off a midlife crisis. The "innovative" career women in Apter's study came to a point in midlife where they realized they were making a lot compromises to be "successful" in the world of work, and they did not want to make these compromises any longer. They reconsidered their goals, desires, and values and frequently changed careers. Several of the women in my study followed similar journeys of deciding to pursue more meaningful work in midlife.

Ray came to a point where she decided to drop out of the rat race. Her decision to quit her job and leave the world of corporate work was a critical juncture at which she consciously decided to live her life differently. She shared:

As my boys ventured through junior high and high school, I just thought, "Why am I doing this? They're almost done," but I thought, "Oh, there is no way you can quit—just keep going." When they went off to college, and finding myself as an empty nester, I really decided that my pace of life just didn't have to be that intense.

Ray expressed a conflict between providing for her children and responding to a need to take care of herself. Like many other women, she waited for her children to leave home before she responded to the urgings rising within her. Then she left the path she had been traversing and "played" for almost two years. Her "playing" reveals a shift in lived

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Arnold, "A Voice of Their Own: Women Moving into Their Fifties," *Health Care for Women International* 26 (2005): 638.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Shellenbarger, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Shellenbarger, 9.

values: she decided to do things she enjoyed (valuing her own needs) and to spend time with people who were important to her (valuing relationships), rather than focusing on having a successful career in the corporate world. Ray's subsequent "Journey" through cancer taught her that life is about "the moments." Experiencing a life-threatening illness can bring to consciousness one's own mortality and cause one to contemplate seriously the meaning of one's life and what one wants to do with the rest of it. It can be the catalyst for making major life changes. Ray's midlife journey seems to have begun with realizing she did not want to continue living as she had been as a corporate employee, but her brush with death clarified for her what was important in life, and she became more careful and conscientious about how she would utilize the time she had left. Time took on new value for her. In talking about her decision to attend CST, she said:

We don't have a whole lot of time. And so, the time that we do have, we need to make sure that these are venues, these are adventures, these are people that are worthy of those moments—on both sides of the equation. It's of benefit to them; it's of benefit to you; and it's mutually beneficial. Otherwise, it's not worth the moments.

Ray went on to note that it was difficult for her to distinguish between growth that had come from growing older and that which came from her experience with cancer:

You think differently about life at 25, and sometimes I think I can't separate aging versus the Journey, and what it's taught me. And maybe I would have learned this without the Journey, but I think the Journey put me in accelerated learning, and not sort of stumbling upon it.

Thus, when Ray met a professor from CST, she was open to possibilities that might present themselves and determined to engage in endeavors that were worthwhile. From her discussion with this professor, she came to an awareness that for her, worthwhile and

meaningful work was that which entailed serving those most alone, underprivileged, and lacking in self-esteem, power, and hope.

In Shellenbarger's study, "the death of one or more loved ones was the second most common triggering factor" for a midlife crisis, which she understands as a time when previously-held goals and values cease to make sense.<sup>8</sup> Arnold also found that "a crisis related to the loss of something or someone significant" was "the precipitating impetus to shift directions" in midlife women's lives. 9 Returning to work after her sister's death, Nancy became increasingly unhappy. The changes that were occurring in her work context were in conflict with her new sense of values and the person that she wanted to become. Nancy had cared for her sister for several months before her death. This was a time of personal growth and spiritual transformation for her. As her sister's caretaker, she became focused on what was really important in life, and as a result of her "born-again" experience while living with her sister, she returned to her job with a new identity as a Christian. Her values had shifted and her life had taken on new meaning as a result of those experiences. She wanted to become someone different, and she felt that she wanted to do something different, even though she did not yet know what. Midlife often unsettles certainties about who one is, who one should be, and who one wants to be. 10 From a Jungian perspective, this is evidence that the Self, the archetype of wholeness in the psyche, is seeking expression: "The acquired sense of self, with its assembled perceptions and complexes, . . . , begins to grate and grind against the greater Self which seeks its

Shellenbarger, 9, xiv.
 Arnold, 639.
 Apter, 46.

own realization." Apter observed in her study that when work environments changed. the automatic pilot innovative midlife women were running on was often disrupted. Previously suppressed feelings of discontent rose to the surface and women began wondering what they wanted to do during the next chapter of their lives. 12 While the experiences surrounding her sister's death had already disrupted the normal pattern of Nancy's life, the new management and work environment she experienced at her job were additionally disturbing and made it more evident to Nancy that she could not continue her life on the same track she had once followed.

Momma G's story has some major similarities to Nancy's. Her search for more personally meaningful work began with the death of her infant niece. At that time, she began feeling called to different work. She was impressed with the memorial service a funeral celebrant led for her niece—it was "comforting and spirit-filled." But the memorial service for her friend's father a few months after that "was the most unmemorializing and un-comforting thing. And I remember at the end of it thinking, 'I could do so much better than this." Since she had long disliked her work as a dental hygienist, she looked into what it would take to become a funeral celebrant. She found that it only required a weekend course, and Momma G did not feel that was enough training to be in a family's life at such a time. Her family had experienced a lot of deaths, some of them tragic, so she knew how the death of a loved one can affect a family. She wanted to be with families at such times and assure them that God loves them and would not send their deceased loved one to hell just because they did not express belief in Jesus

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> James Hollis, The Middle Passage: From Misery to Meaning in Midlife (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1993), 17.

12 Apter, 135.

Christ. Both Apter and Arnold found that women in their fifties have developed a strong self-awareness, and with their increased knowledge and understanding of themselves they become more self-determining and live their lives with more integrity. Momma G had clearly come to an awareness of what her strengths were, and she felt these were well-suited to spiritual care with bereaved persons. This led her to CST's M.Div. program, which allowed her to focus on preparing for work as a chaplain.

While several years younger than Ray, Nancy, and Momma G, Dena had also come to a point where she was dissatisfied with her lifelong career and wanted to do something that was more meaningful than her work in the entertainment industry. She desired to produce something that she felt had more value, thus expressing a generativity theme. She felt that she had been living an "overindulgent life," and she wanted to live more simply, with less stuff. Several women in Arnold's study similarly "spoke of letting go of attachment to material things." Dena's identity as a Christian was made public in her workplace when she conducted a funeral for a co-worker. This experience of presiding over a funeral service was "a very important spiritual experience" for Dena and seemed to be connected with her decision to go to seminary, because, as she said, "I decided after that funeral, ..., to apply to Fuller." Thus, Dena began pursuing the possibility of a theological education as an outgrowth of seeking to live a more meaningful life and one that was in harmony with her values and identity. There is also a sense in Dena's story that a new voice began emerging as she more clearly identified herself as Christian. This is evident in the fact that she conducted the funeral for her coworker and that she began her theological education with the idea that she might write

<sup>13</sup> Arnold, 640.

Christian works expressive of her beliefs and helpful to others. Like many midlife women, she became more aware of who she was and what was meaningful and important to her, and she decided she wanted to live more in line with her values and selfunderstanding. When I interviewed her, Dena appeared to be continuing in a process of seeking and acquiring increasing self-definition and self-integration. Carol Anderson Boyer, in her literature review of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons' development and aging, found that developing and (re)defining personal identity is a central and ongoing aspect of these persons' developmental processes. 4 Many learn to "define themselves independently of outside validation" and derive "a sense of empowerment and personal agency through embracing a stigmatized identity based on their sexual orientation." Lesbian women who have successfully developed these countercultural identities and evaluated their place in society arrive at midlife with a relatively clear selfconcept, a strong sense of identity, and less concern with others' attitudes and opinions."<sup>16</sup> Dena exuded such a self-confidence when she talked about being willing to take risks in answering questions in class. She also revealed self-awareness along with a continuous shaping and re-shaping of identity as she shared her story, particularly as she talked about trying to understand what it meant to be a gay Christian and about her selfperceived roles at her undergraduate school, in her work, and at CST.

Having traversed the terrain of midlife crisis, middle-aged women are able to perceive their own strengths and trust their own knowing. According to Apter, traditional

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Carol Anderson Boyer, "The Impact of Sexual Orientation on Women's Midlife Experience: A Transition Model Approach," *Adultspan Journal* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 39-40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Boyer, 40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Boyer, 39.

women in particular may need to "get to know themselves anew," since they set aside their own thoughts, feelings, and desires in order to take care of others. <sup>17</sup> Pauline may not have lost her sense of self like many traditional women do, but when her daughter graduated from high school, she did decide to look carefully at what she was able to do well. She was in her early fifties at the time, and like other women at this age, she no longer looked outside herself for approval or self-understanding. She used her inner wisdom to create her own judgments of her abilities, so she could do work that was not only significant to her, but was work for which she was gifted.

The stories of the women in this section exemplify the midlife movement toward authenticity, self-integrity, and self-acceptance observed by Arnold and others. As they entered midlife, these women found a new desire to engage in lifestyles and work activities that were aligned with their values, abilities, and passions and thus were meaningful for them.

## Timing: Freer, More Mature, and More Open

Early literature on midlife characterized this time in a woman's life as a negative experience, one fraught with a sense of emptiness and depression due to the empty nest syndrome and or menopause.<sup>19</sup> Further research, however, has found that, while there are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Apter, 108.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Arnold, 632.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Carolyn M. Aldwin and Michael R. Levenson, "Stress, Coping, and Health at Midlife: A Developmental Perspective," in *Handbook of Midlife Development*, ed. Margie E. Lachman (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 188. Also, Toni C. Antonucci and Hiroko Akiyama, "Concern with Others at Midlife: Care, Comfort, or Compromise?" in *Multiple Paths of Midlife Development*, ed. Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 158-59.

individual differences in how the empty nest is experienced, <sup>20</sup> most women feel happy, even buoyant, when their children are successfully launched. <sup>21</sup> They enjoy and take pride in their children's accomplishments. At the same time, they feel freed from the day-to-day demands and tasks of parenting. <sup>22</sup> Thus, "As far as departure of the last child is concerned, the hypothesized loss is really more of a midlife gain." <sup>23</sup> It may even be a time of celebration. In fact, "ripe for change, anticipating new opportunities," a woman may suffer "more distress when her growing child *fails* to leave home." <sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, it is a transition point, and therefore, many women find themselves reevaluating their lives and considering new goals and directions for their futures once their children begin moving out of the house and embarking on their own paths through adulthood.

Apter found that the empty nest was one point at which a midlife crisis might begin for traditional women. With less of their time and focus directed toward the tasks of motherhood, women often felt a lack of direction or purpose. This emptiness, "initially experienced as a catastrophe, ushered in awareness of neglected dimensions of themselves. They discovered, as their long-valued roles changed, a new subjective core." Instead of defining themselves by their roles and connections to others, they became attuned to their own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. Pauline, like Apter's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Jacquelyn Boone James and Corinne J. Lewkowicz, "Themes of Power and Affiliation across Time," in *Multiple Paths of Midlife Development*, ed. Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 138.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Helson, 29, and Antonucci and Akiyama, 158.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Antonucci and Akiyama, 158-59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> David A. Chiriboga, "Crisis, Challenge, and Stability in the Middle Years," in *Multiple Paths of Midlife Development*, ed. Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 318.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Apter, 103; italics in original.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Apter, 79.

traditional women, had left the world of paid work once she became a mother, although she continued to be actively engaged in volunteer work. When her daughter graduated from high school, she thought to herself, "I want to be thoughtful about the next step."

She did not give any indication that she experienced the catastrophic emptiness or lack of purpose that Apter describes as part of traditional women's experiences of the empty nest, but she did determine to take time to reflect on what she had done in her life and to continue doing those things that she had done well in a way that would be meaningful or significant for her "at this point in my life." She became more aware of what her strengths were during her time of reflection and discernment, and she consciously decided to focus on developing and using those. Since she had done a lot of teaching for her church community and felt she had a gift for that work, she began taking courses that she thought would help her be a better, more authoritative religious educator. Eventually, she enrolled in a degree program at CST.

When a woman's caretaking responsibilities decrease and she has more free time, there is a sense that that free time has "to be taken and defined as hers," because "without definite steps it [will] be usurped for others' use." Martha expressed this sentiment when she said that she had decided she "wouldn't just do everything that came along" at that point in her life when she found herself with more time and less responsibilities. She had helped take care of her father before he died, and then she became her mother's primary caretaker when she became ill with cancer. With that role consuming a lot of her time and energy, along with parenting and homemaking, Martha had stepped back from most of her volunteer duties. Her mother died around the time her youngest child started

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Apter, 106.

kindergarten, so she was faced with more time on her hands than that to which she was accustomed. She decided she would be careful about what she did with this extra time and not just enter into every volunteer opportunity that presented itself. She wanted to "choose things that were really life-giving for me, and where I felt like I could contribute." While Martha expressed the desire to be generative through making contributions to the world, her focus was on self-care. She had been drained through caring for others, so she needed to do that which would revive her and give her new energy. She resumed volunteering for her church; then, after two years, she became employed part-time by her congregation. Between this job and caring for her family, she was too busy to seriously consider returning to school. But as her two oldest children began leaving home for college, she started thinking about a career path for herself. After considering different possibilities, Martha decided to follow her previous inklings to go to seminary. In answering my question about whether she thought of herself as in midlife, Martha wrote that her middle-aged years had been "a time of exploring and trying to figure out what I want after many years of taking care of the needs of everyone around me." Similarly, Apter noted that the loss of the intense responsibilities of mothering may be embraced as an opportunity to foster one's own neglected needs, 27 Midlife is often a time of surfacing and recovering suppressed desires. For women who have been focused on meeting others' wants and needs, this midlife call to find out what they need and want can be especially strong and lead to a definitive break from past patterns as they seek to meet deep-down desires.

The freedom that midlife women experience once their children have fledged and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Apter, 103.

left the nest can be disorienting and overwhelming. CJ spoke about getting to "that place in life" where there are not that "many constraints and a lot of opportunity is open to you, ... It can be kind of scary." Realizing that many options are available to her, a midlife woman may face what she has not done in her life. Writing from a Jungian perspective, Robert Johnson and Jerry Ruhl observe that midlife is that time when "our unlived lives rear up inside us, demanding attention."28 By "unlived life," Johnson and Ruhl mean "all those essential aspects of you that have not been adequately integrated into your experience," along with life choices not made, longings not fulfilled, and other things not done that "we were so sure we were supposed to do." 29 CJ's unlived life came to the fore after the last child in her household went off to college. At that point, she and her husband were "looking at the second half of our lives, thinking, 'This is nice." But then CJ realized there was one thing she wanted to do in her life that she had not yet done, and that was to become a pastor. With her children out of the house and retirement in sight, she was free to pursue this long-deferred desire. "Looking back," she wrote, "the decision to go to seminary after the kids were grown felt like the first really free-of-otherconstraints decision I've ever made." Still, she felt "kind of guilty coming up here, this far, just to go to school." It seemed "very much self-indulgent" to her to drive approximately two to three hours each way to fulfill her dream. Ray shared similar sentiments:

It's a real selfish part of my life. Maybe as a single mom and only child, maybe it's just time to have that space for me. Maybe that's what this is, because when

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Robert A. Johnson and Jerry M. Ruhl, *Living Your Unlived Life: Coping with Unrealized Dreams and Fulfilling Your Purpose in the Second Half of Life* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2007), ix.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Johnson and Ruhl, 1-2.

this is done, it will be space for other people. Kind of the flip of this. Apter noted that, "on the whole, the older a woman was, the more directly she handled those tricky problems of guilt, duty, and commitment." Jung wrote that "for a young person it is almost a sin, or at least a danger, to be too preoccupied with himself [or herself]; but for the [midlife] person it is a duty and a necessity to devote serious attention to himself" or herself. 31 CJ and Ray faced the guilt of indulging inner desires and determined that they had a right to use their time and money as they so chose. However, Ray provided some justification for her "selfishness" by saying that she would compensate for it by giving to others later. This sounds similar to what Jung says about needing to "expiate" for the inner focus of the individuation process by bringing "forth values which are an equivalent substitute for [one's] absence in the collective personal sphere."<sup>32</sup> These two women had listened to the call of the archetypal Self, which seeks self-actualization and harmony between unconscious and conscious worlds, and thus they had embarked on a journey to do that which would be self-fulfilling and would lead to work that gave back to society.

In her study, Apter observed that midlife women began relinquishing the selfdefinitions developed through social images and the eyes of others and began developing their own understandings of who they were.<sup>33</sup> They decided to be themselves and realized that their opinions and feelings had value. Their self-confidence increased and the

Apter, 297.
 Jung, "Stages of Life," 399.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Carl Jung, "Adaptation, Individuation and Collectivity," in *The Symbolic Life:* Miscellaneous Writings, trans. R. F. C. Hull, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, v. 18 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 451.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Apter, 13, 72.

judgments and disapproval of others carried less weight. "Women gain power when they age, through self-confidence and self-knowledge," and they become more assertive. 34

Kathleen spoke of being in a process of developing this self-knowledge and self-confidence and how important it was to her to have a sense of personal power as she looked toward becoming a congregational minister. Before deciding to attend seminary around the age of 40, she did not feel ready to be a strong leader. Similarly, Elise and Beth felt that their life experiences and increased maturity were important or even necessary preconditions for their entrance into ministry. Carol Franz's longitudinal study of midlife adults found that levels of "maturity, complexity, and adaptation to the environment" were "significantly higher at age 41 than at age 31." As people aged, they also demonstrated greater "integration of emotions and relationships." These characteristics better prepare middle-aged persons for the demands of pastoral leadership.

Not only did Kathleen and Beth mention the timing of maturity in relation to their decisions to attend theological school, but they also had experiences of synchronous events. Jung defined synchronicity as "the simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful parallels to the momentary subjective state—and, in certain cases, vice versa." In other words, synchronicity is a meaningful coincidence between an inner, psychic event and an outer,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Apter, 76, 77.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Carol E. Franz, "Stability and Change in the Transition to Midlife: A Longitudinal Study of Midlife Adults," in *Multiple Paths of Midlife Development*, ed. Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Franz, 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> C. G. Jung, "Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle," in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, v. 8 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 441.

physical event.<sup>38</sup> When Kathleen read *Proverbs of Ashes*, things clicked into place for her. There was a synchronicity between reading the book in preparation for a sermon and the thoughts that came to her: one, that she was ready to go back to school, and two, that she could follow in the footsteps of one of the authors of the book, Rebecca Parker, who had attended CST and become president of the theological school Kathleen had thought she needed to attend, since it was her denomination's school.

Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda Bolen observes that midlife transitions are inbetween times or periods of liminality, and it is during such liminal times that we are
more open to becoming aware of synchronicity. <sup>39</sup> In addition, "Synchronicities such as
the uncanny and timely appearance of a significant person or opportunity are often choice
bringers. Will we respond? And if we do, will it usher in a new phase of our lives?"

Beth opened herself to synchronicity when she asked God for a sign that God wanted her
to go to seminary. When she received a retirement statement in the mail that pointed to
the possibility of retiring soon, Beth took this as her sign. Earlier, she had seen the
synchronicity in being asked to direct a street ministry, which led to her wanting to
devote more of her life to ministry. As she began seriously considering going to
seminary, other events seemed synchronous to her: CST had recently made it possible to
start her coursework near her home, and she talked with a CST representative whose life
story was much like hers.

Ray was in a period of liminality when she met a CST professor to whom she felt

<sup>38</sup> Stein, Jung's Map of the Soul, 234.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Jean Shinoda Bolen, Crossing to Avalon: A Woman's Midlife Pilgrimage (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Bolen, 8-9.

uniquely drawn. She was in the process of looking for a new job or career, having recently recovered from a battle with cancer. The presence of this professor at a workshop Ray happened to be attending was synchronous, and it led to a later lunch meeting. Synchronously (or so it seemed), this meeting took place on a day set aside for prospective CST students to visit the campus, and Ray's conversation with the professor prompted the professor to suggest that Ray check out CST through the Visit Day activities. This led to Ray's decision to enroll in a program that would prepare her to be a chaplain.

# Hearing and Responding to Inner Desires

In the previous subsection, I introduced the idea of "unlived life." Of the women in my research group, CJ and her life story demonstrated this concept the best. Several times over the course of her life, CJ had considered becoming a minister. She finally acted on this desire by entering seminary at the age of 55. Other women in my study also became conscious in midlife of unfulfilled desires and longings. Midlife is a time when repressed dreams and needs come to the surface of awareness and demand active attention. Drawing upon Jungian psychology, Shellenbarger argues that "the energies that drive midlife crisis spring from hopes, wishes, and goals that have been repressed. When these parts of ourselves reemerge, they take on great power." The power of these awakened urges and longings may lead to major life changes, including new vocations or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Shellenbarger, 39.

vocations once considered but not pursued, as with CJ, Jane, Kathleen, and Dena. 42

These four women had all considered religious vocations when they were children or teens. For Jane, her sense of call to seminary and ordination was preceded by a series of events that brought her into increasing involvement with a Christian congregation.

Kathleen's life path led her to Unitarian Universalism, where she was able to fulfill her desire to be actively involved in the organizational structure and ministry of a religious community. Unhappy with her situation and work outside of church, Kathleen struggled to "figure out where I needed to go next." Eventually she found her way to the Unitarian Universalist equivalent of her childhood wish to be a nun: going to seminary to become an ordained minister. Dena had considered ministry as a teenager, but her denomination did not ordain women, so she chose the more attractive career route of entertainment. As a self-identified lesbian, ordained ministry had not been an option for Dena in the faith communities she joined as an adult. Yet, providing pastoral leadership with her work staff, particularly as a funeral officiant, seemed to have re-awakened in Dena a desire to be a religious leader, for it was after that funeral experience that Dena applied to seminary.

In her study, Apter observed that "after the construction work of midlife, women devote the energy they once directed towards meeting idealized expectations to managing their own needs and desires." Midlife is a time when many women stop being who

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> According to Murray Stein, "At midlife 'the repressed'-in Jungian terminology, the 'shadow'-returns and needs to be dealt with in a new way, because the seeds of psychological renewal and of possible future directions for life lie hidden within it. These seeds may germinate into a vocation, and they will certainly demand further, and often unpredictable psychological development." *In Midlife: A Jungian Perspective* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1983), 83.

<sup>43</sup> Apter. 36.

others want them to be and doing what others want them to do and pursue their own wishes and heart-longings. As adults, several women in my research group had been drawn to religious studies and had actively sought a meaningful faith and spirituality. In midlife, they decided to make a greater investment in their interests and desires by going to seminary. Myfanwy had considered ordination "off and on for years" before she had the spiritual experience of knowing she was called to ordained ministry. Meanwhile, she had gone back to school at the age of 42 and majored in religious studies. Martha had majored in religious studies as a young, traditional undergraduate student. Throughout her adult life she had engaged in volunteer ministry with her congregation. Then, as she entered midlife, she applied for and received a position as director of the children's education program for her congregation. Martha's experiences in this position provided the impetus for her to enroll at CST. Anne had not grown up in a religious family, but as a college student, she had chosen to focus on religion and philosophy in order to better understand what she perceived as very meaningful to a lot of people. In a similar vein, Sierra first became involved with Christianity while she was going to college. However, she soon began struggling with mixed feelings toward Christianity in its institutional and theological forms. This led her to start reading theological and biblical scholars on her own. Attending theological school allowed her to continue her studies in depth, more extensively, and in conversation with others. Although Natalie's parents were not practicing Christians themselves, they put her in a Methodist boarding school when she was seven years old. She developed a "strong faith in God," and as an adult, she wanted to pursue theological studies, but she was discouraged from this by her atheist family and friends. However, when she was 35, she decided that she would not be deterred by others' perspectives and would instead follow the leadings of her heart, which led her to enroll in seminary courses.

# Responding to a Call

From a Jungian perspective, in midlife we are called to become fully who we are; this is our ultimate vocation. 44 Yet, along this journey toward individuation, we may be called to work that seems to serve a greater purpose. Some Jungians speak of this call as coming from the *soul*, "the transpersonal, supra-individual soul of the metaphysicians and theologians, soul in the spiritual and religious sense, as a manifestation of the mind of God, the objective psyche beyond human understanding." While the archetypal energies of the Self draw us to individuate, to strive toward self-realization and psychic wholeness, the soul, according to Jungian analyst James Hollis,

unceasingly drives us toward more conscious, evolved engagement in the four abiding orders of mystery in which our journey plays out: (1) the immense cosmos..., (2) ambient nature,..., (3) each proximate other, who brings the challenge of relationship, and (4) our own elusive, insurgent Self.<sup>3,46</sup>

The soul is an "autonomous energy" that transcends consciousness, yet we are limited to experiencing it within our own psyches.<sup>47</sup> For Jung, the psyche is essentially religious, and religious feelings are "authentic expressions of the collective psyche" or soul.<sup>48</sup> One way of thinking of the relationship between the Self and the soul is that the Self is the

<sup>44</sup> Hollis, Finding Meaning, 154.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Robert H. Hopcke, A Guided Tour of the Collected Works of C. G. Jung (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Hollis, Finding Meaning, 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Hollis, Finding Meaning, 191.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Susan Rowland, *Jung: A Feminist Revision* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 37.

image of "God within us," while the soul is the expression of God's mind and will in, through, and beyond us.<sup>49</sup> Thus, when a midlife person speaks of being "called by God," a Jungian will frequently understand that call in terms of it coming from the archetypal Self or the transpersonal soul.

Freelance writer Gregg Levoy states that "it simply doesn't matter" what we call the source of a calling, whether it be "God, the Patterning Intelligence, the Design Mind, the Unconscious, the Soul, the Force of Completion," or some other name, for whatever it is, "this force announces the need for change, and the response for which it calls is an awakening of some kind."50 Within the Jungian framework, calls to change, to awaken to the Self and its desires, to become more self-aware, and to commune with the archetypes of the personal and collective unconsciouses are calls to individuation. Jung observed that the driving force of the unconscious "seems to be in essence only an urge towards selfrealization."<sup>51</sup> This powerful force or set of forces within our psyches, he said, has the ability to "thwart our will, to obsess our consciousness and to influence our moods and actions."52 To most, if not all, of the women in my study who said they experienced a call, it probably does "matter" how the source of that calling is named and described. It was essential that they understood themselves as having been called by the God of their faith to ministry or seminary before they made the commitment to enroll in theological school. However, because Jung's theory is specifically focused on psychological development during the middle-aged years, I will explore some ways in which his theory

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Jung, "Part Two: Individuation," 238.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Gregg Levoy, Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Jung, "Part Two: Individuation," 184. <sup>52</sup> Jung, "Part Two: Individuation," 238.

can serve as an interpretive lens for my research participants' experiences.

Through the lens of Jungian psychology, the energies of the archetypal Self and the transcendent soul moved many of the women in my research group in the direction of theological school. Jackie's experience of feeling compelled to respond to an "altar call" and then not being able to speak is a fitting example of how some inexplicable force or power can move us to act against our conscious inclinations and wills and then not let us go. This experience was not one Jackie could easily forget, and she began opening herself up to the possibility of becoming a pastor. When she would think about being an ordained minister, she would see herself "offering the [communion] table to people in unconventional places, like under bridges. That came up all the time." Jung surmised that the unconscious creates images that respond to conscious situations, which may explain visions like Jackie's and Momma G's. 53 It may also explain Jane's and Ray's experiences of hearing a divine voice that directed them toward their calls. Thus, a Jungian analyst might say that mystical or spiritual experiences such as these were messages from the unconscious meant to help these women move toward a realization of their fullest potential and wholeness.

Hollis equates soul with "transcendent meaning" and defines it as "our intuited sense of our own depth, our deepest-running, purposeful energy, our longing for meaning, and our participation in something much greater than ordinary consciousness can grasp."<sup>54</sup> Momma G knew that she had gifts for helping people in times of grief, and she found a sense of meaning and purpose in deciding to become an end-of-life spiritual

Jung, "Part Two: Individuation," 183.
 Hollis, Finding Meaning, 5, 6.

care-giver. Soul was speaking to her. Anne had found in her life that working with people on the margins of society was deeply meaningful for her; it was like prayer. So, when she heard the office of deacon described as being about service, she felt drawn—called—to that office. Yet something working within her would not let her stop there.

Synchronously, just when she had mailed off her application to be a deacon, she began feeling a call to serve the Eucharist. She remembered that the Eucharist held special meaning for her and had influenced her decision to become a Christian. Like Beth, she let God know that she needed some outward evidence that God wanted her to be a priest before she would pursue that path. That evidence came through the question her senior ward asked the bishop about what Anne would need to do if she felt called to be a priest. Soul was at work in her life, drawing her to what was most meaningful to her.

The Self or soul frequently expresses itself in the form of deep, unyielding desires. As discussed earlier in this chapter, many of my research participants' senses of call were closely tied to desires that were present in childhood and were reawakened in middle age or to desires that only came to consciousness in midlife. There were also desires or interests that found expression in participants' adult lives, but they did not take the form of "calls" until midlife. For example, Martha had majored in religious studies as an undergraduate and volunteered for her congregation during most of her adult life. Yet it was not until that transitional time in her life when she became a paid staff member in her congregation and was asked to provide more and more worship leadership that she began to gain a sense of call to ministry.

Combined with desire may be a firm knowing. Watching her minister bless the

bread and wine of communion one Sunday, Sierra just knew, without a doubt, that she was called to serve communion. It was something she had to and wanted to do. Nancy experienced the obsession of consciousness that can be caused by the workings of the Self when the story of a game warden's chaplain refused to leave her head. Finally, upon questioning why this was so, she came to the sure knowledge that this was what she wanted to do—she wanted to be a chaplain. According to Hollis, "We may choose careers, but we do not choose vocation. Vocation chooses us. To choose what chooses us is a freedom the by-product of which will be a sense of rightness and a harmony within."55 Myfanwy expressed this sense of being chosen by a vocation when she wrote, "I'm not sure I could say I specifically 'chose' to pursue the degree in theology; rather, it seems to have chosen me." In deciding to follow the vocations that chose them, these women experienced the freedom of knowing they were on paths that were right for them.

Bolen points out that the call to individuation, or to "adventure," often must await the readiness of the individual:

In periods of stability, we are too involved or too busy with what is at hand to respond to a call to adventure. We are simply not available. There are also periods of depletion when we cannot respond to anything new, however attractive the invitation might be. . . . Only in periods of availability will a person respond to a call to adventure.<sup>56</sup>

Beth was a busy career woman, wife, mother, and church volunteer when she experienced a distinct feeling that she should do more in terms of devoting more of her life to ministry. This desire arose while she was directing a street ministry, and it may have been this work that opened a space inside her to hearing the call to move in a new

<sup>55</sup> Hollis, *Finding Meaning*, 149. 56 Bolen, 9.

direction with her life. Like Beth, Elise had been actively involved in church ministry and leadership throughout her adult life and had a successful career, a husband, and children when she began considering a call to ordained ministry. Unlike Beth, Elise's process toward understanding she had a call was initiated by congregants' responses to a sermon she preached, rather than by an inner desire or longing. However, she took to heart the comments that she "had missed her calling" and engaged in a personal discernment process. A few years earlier, she had been through a time of theological questioning and soul-searching, so this may have inwardly prepared her to be open to the possibility of becoming a pastor. Her reflection processes led her to an understanding that this was indeed her call.

In her study, Shellenbarger found that spiritual insights or experiences often initiated midlife crises. If a crisis is understood as a turning point, then the spiritual sense of being called was certainly a midlife crisis for many of my research participants. Levoy asserts, "The purpose of calls is to summon adherents away from their daily grinds to a new level of awareness, into a sacred frame of mind, into communion with that which is bigger than themselves." The midlife women in my study who experienced a call and responded to it by coming to seminary were drawn away from other life paths to pursue a spiritual, sacred mission to serve others through professional ministry. They chose to enter into work that would not feed their conscious egos, but would nurture their souls.

### Comparisons and Conclusions

In 2011, the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis surveyed its

Master of Social Work (MSW) students from the previous ten years who had studied in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Levoy, 2.

the program when they were over 40 years old. "The survey revealed that more than half of the students returning to school over the age of 40 were switching careers to the social work field instead of advancing current social work careers."58 Similarly, only two of the women in my study had worked as religious professionals before beginning their M.Div. programs. Most were looking to begin a new career. Canadian adult educator Jo-Anne Willment lists several reasons for entering master's programs that midlife learners have informally reported to her, including "the opportunity for new knowledge," "to prepare for career developments," and "to adapt theory to practice." A small percentage reported "embarking on study for salary increases or promotion." Most of the reasons Willment lists do not sound like the reasons the participants in my study offered for enrolling in a graduate theological school, but some correlations can be made. Several women were looking for "new knowledge." Dena was particularly motivated to pursue a theological education by a desire to study and learn, with the idea of beginning a writing career in the back of her mind. Martha sought to gain knowledge to do her paid church work better, while Pauline wanted to become a more knowledgeable religious educator, whether paid or not. Jackie was, in a sense, seeking a promotion: she wanted to become a minister who could consecrate the Eucharist, rather than being a lay person who was coordinating the work of urban ministers. Like many midlife professionals, Altheia had returned to CST to take a few classes in order to improve her work status.

<sup>60</sup> Willment, 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Jessica Martin, "Survey Looks at Experience of Mid-Life and Older Adults Returning to Graduate Education," Newsroom, Washington University in St. Louis, Sept. 22, 2011, http://news.wustl.edu/news/Pages/22583.aspx (accessed Oct. 14, 2011).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Jo-Anne H. Willment, "Understanding the Dimensions of Midlife," in *Learners in Midlife: Graduate Education and Workplaces in Canada*, ed. Jo-Anne H. Willment (NW Calgary, Alberta: Detselig Enterprises, 2008), 32-33.

K. C. Kirasic, a developmental psychologist, divides the reasons underlying midlife adults' return to educational settings into two categories: employment and personal. The employment reasons she lists are similar to the ones Willment named: "to update skills to hold onto a job, to maintain a record of continuing education credits," "to acquire knowledge to maintain credibility in their current positions," to protect "against job obsolescence," and to gain "increased job security." Again, only the desire to increase work-related skills and knowledge is related to the women in my study.

According to Kirasic, midlife adults' personal reasons for returning to college include encountering "an event that sparked an interest that can be pursued only at a university," a change in marital status (particularly for women), "frequently changing goals and values in what they find important in their lives" that are best pursued through further education, and the rediscovery of "an intellectual or vocational passion that until now was unattainable due to work or relationship responsibilities." As I have elucidated in this chapter, several of the midlife women in my study returned to school in order to pursue a buried vocational desire or because of changing values and goals in life.

Writing in the mid-1990s, adult educators Kathleen Taylor and Catherine

Marienau observed that when adult women were asked why they were in college, they
initially talked about how a college degree would help them in terms of employment:
"They want to change jobs, would like more fulfilling careers, are ready for new
responsibilities, need better pay." Eventually, though, other reasons would emerge:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> K. C. Kirasic, Midlife in Context (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 167-68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Kirasic, 168, 166.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Kathleen Taylor and Catherine Marienau, "Bridging Practice and Theory for Women's Adult Development," in *Learning Environments for Women's Adult Development: Bridges* 

They speak of "becoming someone" or of "finding out who I am." For all these women, education represents change—a major shift in how they have lived their lives and, at a more basic level, who they have been and who they might become in the future.<sup>64</sup>

None of the women in my study talked about deciding to attend seminary in order to gain a sense of "being someone" or to discover who they were. However, Julie did speak of finding her voice and engaging in self-exploration, so maybe she had felt a need to become someone separate from her husband and her roles as wife and mother and to figure out who she really was. For many of the participants, attending theological school definitely represented a major change in their lives and a movement toward becoming someone different in others' eyes and their own, whether they were conscious of it or not.

New students at schools that belong to the Association of Theological Schools are asked to fill out an "Entering Student Questionnaire." ATS's consolidation of the data for the 2009-2010 school year provides some points of comparison with what I found in my study. When asked to rank, on a scale of 1-5, the importance of various factors on their decision to pursue theological education, the three factors that women (of all ages) ranked, on average, as most important were "experienced a call from God," "opportunity for study and growth," and "desire to serve others." It is also noteworthy that, on average, women ranked these factors as more important than men did.

As in ATS's data, the most influential factor in deciding to attend seminary for the majority of the participants in my study was experiencing a call. However, in some

Toward Change, ed. Kathleen Taylor and Catherine Marienau, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 65 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Taylor and Marienau, 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> From "Table 15: Importance of Factors in Decision to Pursue Theological Education," in Association of Theological Schools, "Student Information Project."

cases, it was not clear that the language of "call" was present before a woman began attending seminary or engaging in the work required to be ordained in her tradition. One participant shared that it was not until she attended the new student orientation and heard other people talk about their "calls" that she began associating that word with her own experience. When Beth was asked to share her "call story" during a course for lay speakers, she did not know what to say. However, after another person confirmed for her that her desire to devote more of her life to ministry was a call, Beth began using this language to talk about her sense of direction. Other women also intimated that they only began speaking in terms of having a "call" after they had to write essays for their denominations or for CPE explaining their sense of call. The language of "call" sometimes seemed to be a retrospective imposition on a woman's story. This is not to say that these women were not divinely led or called into ministry. Yet, this is not how all of them originally thought of their desire to go into ministry or chaplaincy or to attend theological school. Several of the women appeared to associate being called with having a mystical or Pentecostal-type of experience. Those who had had such experiences were certain that they had been called. Nonetheless, my analysis reveals that many of the women who determined they had calls to ministry were, less dramatically, people who loved being involved in church, who enjoyed providing worship and educational leadership, and who had a deep connection with the Eucharist/communion.

The two other factors that women tended to rank highly as influencing their decisions to enroll in a theological school are also evident in the narratives of the participants in my study. Several participants were primarily or secondarily motivated by

a yearning to learn more, grow, and develop their skills and abilities. Some of their stories are noted in the subsection, "Pursuing the Heart's Desire." The desire to serve or help others was apparent in many participants' narratives; however, the language of wanting to serve others or being called to service appeared as a dominant idea in only four women's stories. Perhaps being exposed to feminist theology in seminary had caused many of the women to question such language. It is also possible that, as contemporary midlife women, the participants in my study had moved past the selfsacrificial ways of thinking and being that were characterized as the "sin" of women by young feminist theologians writing twenty to thirty years ago. 66 In other words, as a result of liberating cultural influences and midlife processes, the self-denial they may have practiced in the past, particularly if they had raised children, had been set aside in order to pursue their own dreams, goals, and desires. They had no aspirations to lose themselves in service, although they may have felt that their gifts and callings were leading them to engage in work to improve others' lives. 67 Most of these women were grounded in a strong sense of themselves, and I could not see them negating their selfhood in order to serve others. In addition, a correlation may be made with Carol Gilligan's theory of women's moral development. In the second stage of developing an ethic of care, women equate "the good" with "caring for others." As part of the second transition, women examine "the assumptions underlying the conventions of female self-abnegation and

<sup>66</sup> For example, Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Susan Nelson Dunfee.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> For a brief discussion of women's tendency and "temptation" to negate themselves and give themselves away in service, see Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 12-14. Keller focuses on how this tendency is an outcome of living in patriarchal cultures.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 74.

moral self-sacrifice" and reject them as immoral because they have the power to cause harm. <sup>69</sup> This reflection process leads women into the third perspective, which asserts "a moral equality between self and other" and includes "both in the compass of care." <sup>70</sup> Thus, "the good" becomes associated with caring for self as well as others. This third perspective, where one's own needs and desires are perceived as equal in value to what others want and need, is characteristic of midlife women. <sup>71</sup>

The themes I found in my study participants' journeys to deciding to attend theological school can be correlated with themes found in other works on midlife development and transition. The experiences of being called and following the heart's desire have many resonances with the individuation process in Jungian psychology. The desire to do something more meaningful and to make a contribution to the future echoes the conflict of generativity versus stagnation in Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Midlife often finds women anticipating more free time as children leave the nest and their work lives change. Thus, midlife is the "right time" to consider new ventures and to pursue long-neglected interests and desires.

While I made connections between most of the participants' stories and midlife characteristics, it should be noted that not all of the women were chronologically in midlife when they began seminary (i.e., they were under 35 years of age), and others may not have been in midlife from a Jungian or Eriksonian developmental standpoint. In particular, the two Asian women in my study group who began attending CST before

<sup>69</sup> Gilligan, 90.

<sup>70</sup> Gilligan, 90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Carol Picard, "Pattern of Expanding Consciousness in Midlife Women: Creative Movement and the Narrative as Modes of Expression." *Nursing Science Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (2000): 154.

they were 35 had distinctly different reasons for choosing to go to theological school. While age may have been a factor in this difference, there is also the consideration that both of them were international students who were living in California because their husbands chose to pursue graduate degrees in Claremont. As young women with a lot of energy, they were not content to be solely housewives and mothers. Yet, because of their immigration status, they were limited in how much and what type of work they could do outside the home. Going to school was likely the most attractive option for them, especially since they both had a thirst for learning and intellectual stimulation.

Like many other women their ages, the majority of the women who participated in my study chose in midlife to pursue their interests and desires or seek more meaningful work to do. These women were different from other midlife women, however, in that their searches and desires led them in the direction of preparing for various forms of ministry—pastoring, chaplaincy, and religious education. Their souls, their Selves, the intuitions and voices that speak from beyond ego consciousness, prompted these women, unlike other women, to pursue the path of theologically-educated ministry. Most of them felt they were divinely called to the ministries for which they were preparing themselves. Thus, for them, there was a coming together of that work they most needed to do and "that the world most needs to have done"; they had found the place where their "deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95.

### CHAPTER 5

Contextual Influences on Midlife Women's Experiences of Seminary

To understand my research participants' experiences of theological education, it is helpful to know what their backgrounds were and how well they were prepared for the types of work that are required of graduate theological school students. It is also important to recognize that these midlife women were more than just students; they had a lot going on in their lives outside of their studies. Relationships, financial resources, spirituality, and time spent working and commuting all affect a woman's experience of seminary. Researchers Mike Martin and Daniel Zimprich have observed that "in middle adulthood, after having reached a high level, cognitive performance will be shaped strongly by individual environments." Thus, context affects cognitive functioning, which in turn influences perceptions of seminary experiences. The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate contextual factors that contributed to the ways in which the midlife women seminarians in my study experienced their time in theological school.

### Preparation for Theological School

At Claremont School of Theology, students are sometimes told that they are not going to be taught what to think, but how to think. Students are expected to develop their own beliefs and understandings in critical and reflective dialogue with great thinkers of the past and present (including their professors). Some professors do a better job than others of helping students learn how to think and write in the ways of their respective disciplines. Therefore, what a woman brings into a classroom may have a significant

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Mike Martin and Daniel Zimprich, "Cognitive Development in Midlife," in *Middle Adulthood: A Lifespan Perspective*, ed. Sherry L. Willis and Mike Martin (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 181.

impact on how comfortable and successful she feels with the class and its work. Students who have backgrounds in fields that have required them to think, write, and process information in ways similar to those needed for seminary courses will likely find the coursework at seminary easier than those students who do not have such backgrounds. For midlife women, experiences with classes and coursework may also be affected by how recently they have taken college-level courses and their age. In this chapter division, I will examine how well prepared research participants were for studying at CST or ETSC.

## **Educational and Work Backgrounds**

Midlife women who attend theological school have a diverse range of educational backgrounds. Some enter seminary having recently completed bachelor's degrees, while a few have doctoral degrees. Before beginning graduate theological school studies, one woman in my research group had a J.D.; one had two master's degrees; three others had one master's degree; and four additional women had previously begun a master's degree program. Altheia had an M.Div. and a D.Min. before she returned to CST to take classes in Methodist studies, and she completed a master's degree in nursing after she began her Methodism coursework. Research has correlated higher levels of education with the maintenance of cognitive abilities as people age, so the participants who had engaged in graduate studies before attending theological school were likely better equipped cognitively as well as more prepared educationally for the requirements of their seminary

coursework.2

Table 6. Participants' Fields of Higher Education Studies before Seminary

FIELDS OF PREVIOUS STUDIES	NUMBER OF WOMEN
Social Sciences (including psychology, cultural studies, anthropology, communication studies, political science)	11
Liberal Arts/Humanities (including languages, literature, history, science writing, music)	10
Education	5
Business (including human resource management, accounting, marketing)	4
Medicine (nursing, dental hygienistry, medical secretary)	3
Religion and Philosophy	3
Law	2
Media (audiovisual technology, broadcasting)	2
Sciences (biology, food science)	2

Table 6 lists areas of study that the women in my research group had pursued in higher education programs before beginning their studies at CST or ETSC. Studies in the social science, liberal arts, and educational fields are probably the best preparation for the types of reading, writing, and thinking required of seminary students, and these were the top three fields of past study among my research participants. In the field of social science, psychology was the most common area of interest. Out of the eleven people who had focused on the social sciences during some part of their pre-CST studies, five had specialized in psychology during their undergraduate programs (with four of them getting majors or minors in the field), and one additional person had completed a master's degree in psychology. Such a background was likely beneficial to these women in their practical

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Sherry L. Willis and K. Warner Schaie, "Cognitive Trajectories in Midlife and Cognitive Functioning in Old Age," in *Middle Adulthood: A Lifespan Perspective*, ed. Sherry L. Willis and Mike Martin (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 266.

theology courses.<sup>3</sup> In the liberal arts category, four of the women had majors or minors in English, and three of them had focused on this field with the intent to teach it. Assuming that the study of English includes some focus on writing, having such a background would be helpful at theological school, where a lot of writing is required.

One might think that a background in religious studies would give a student an advantage at seminary. However, the participant in my study who had majored in religion and philosophy as an undergraduate (two others had focused specifically on religious studies) found it to be of limited assistance to her as an M.Div. student. While she was familiar with "some of the big religious studies people," she felt she needed more background in the Bible and Christian theology. This points to the expectation many theological school professors have that students come to seminary with a working knowledge of these areas of the Christian tradition. Yet many people do not have this prior knowledge upon which to draw, which can make it difficult to grasp new ideas and concepts that are based upon familiarity with the Bible and Christian thinking.

Not only do midlife women come to theological school with a variety of educational backgrounds, they have a wide range of work experiences as well. The type of work a midlife woman has been doing can have a significant impact on her ability to meet the demands of graduate theological school, especially if she has not attended school recently. Certain skills and cognitive activities have been put to use more than others, while some have been allowed to wane. Research has found that job complexity,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Connecting back to the analysis in Chapter 4 of why midlife women choose to go to theological school, I would note that the popularity of the social sciences and other people-oriented studies among my research participants points to these women's desires to understand, assist, and serve others.

in terms of having diverse stimuli and requiring a large number of decisions with multiple factors to consider, results in higher levels of intellectual functioning. Many of the women in my research group had worked in demanding, complex jobs that entailed considering a variety of elements in making decisions and providing leadership. Among the participants, there was a retired school administrator, former teachers, a lawyer, a television producer, a director of development, and a woman who had held a high-ranking position in a major corporation. In addition, many of the participants had served in leadership roles in their churches as volunteers and as paid staff. Complex, cognitively-demanding environments also lead to a "greater valuation of self-direction and autonomy," so midlife women who are used to these kinds of environments will desire and appreciate opportunities to determine the direction of their own studies and to make choices about the types of assignments they do.<sup>5</sup>

# Age and Gap between School Experiences

A person's age and the time that has lapsed between enrollments in higher education courses can influence a person's experiences of theological school considerably. When one has been away from school for several years, it can be difficult to get back in the mode of focusing time and attention on school work. Writing papers and studying for tests is easier if one has engaged in these types of activities recently. In addition, Willment observes that when adults go back to school in midlife,

Their role as a learner is new and very uncertain; their experience with education is often back-dated to the undergraduate days before the introduction of new technologies that altered education; and their responses to other learners, professors, and institutions are rusty. Those switching disciplines are confronted

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Willis and Schaie, "Cognitive Trajectories in Midlife," 261.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Willis and Schaie, "Cognitive Trajectories in Midlife," 261.

with a new language that is academically-based. The range of acronyms and terminologies are often unrecognizable, and the academic culture which dictates practices, rules, and procedures are distinctively different from those experienced outside the academy. Collectively, learners feel they are functioning in a foreign land where the language, customs, and practices are unknown.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, adults who have spent many years carrying responsibilities in their families, communities, and workplaces have gained the experience and developed the flexibility to adapt and adjust to new situations and make changes in their lives in ways that lead to positive outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

Table 7. Gap between Higher Educational Experiences

Time between previous higher	Number
education coursework and	of
beginning of CST/ETSC studies	women
Overlap	1
Less than a year	3
1-5 years	6
6-10 years	3
11-15 years	3
16-20 years	2
20-25 years	2
37 years	1

Table 7 shows how much time had passed between when participants last took college courses for credit and when they began studying at CST or ETSC. The mean average number of years between experiences with higher education coursework was about 9.8; the median was six. Two of the women had completed bachelor's degrees less than two years before enrolling at CST, and one had completed a master's degree during the year before she began her M.Div. The greatest gap in taking classes for credit was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Willment, 36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Willment, 36.

thirty-seven years.<sup>8</sup> Thus, midlife women attending theological school range widely in how recently they have attended school and in the nature of their most recent educational experiences.

Table 8. Age When Participants Began Studies at CST or ETSC

Age at time of first CST/ETSC class	Number of women
30-34	3
35-39	3
40-44	5
45-49	1
50-54	7
55	2

In my research group, five of the women were between the ages of 30 and 35 when they began studying at CST or ETSC, six were between the ages of 38 and 44, and ten were between the ages of 48 and 55 (see Table 8 for another age breakdown). A few of the older women had come to seminary when they did because of a sense of urgency that, if they were going to begin a new career, they needed to do it now, before they became any older. These women wanted to complete their schooling as quickly as possible, so they could begin the work they wanted to do.

Older students come to seminary with knowledge and wisdom gained through years of working, volunteering, and living life. Research on crystallized abilities—those abilities gained through formal schooling and life experience—has found that as people

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> However, this participant had audited a couple graduate-level courses at another theological school before enrolling at CST.

age, these abilities tend to be maintained or to increase until late in life. <sup>9</sup> Contrary to common cultural beliefs, most cognitive abilities do not decline as people enter and move through middle age. While "there is growing evidence of considerable individual differences in cognitive functioning in midlife" and in whether particular abilities increase or decrease, the majority of people remain stable in their number, word fluency, and memory recall abilities throughout their middle-aged years (from 39 to 60). <sup>10</sup> In terms of inductive reasoning, vocabulary, verbal memory, and spatial orientation abilities, middle-aged individuals actually function "at a higher level than they did at age 25." <sup>11</sup> Furthermore, women do not reach their peak performance in vocabulary, verbal memory, and spatial orientation until their early sixties. <sup>12</sup> However, "the transmission of neural signals [has] been shown to slow with age," leading to "a slight decline in speed of learning novel material (and speed of processing in general)." <sup>13</sup> To compensate for "age-related neural decline," high-functioning midlife brains reorganize their "neural networks" and begin drawing simultaneously on both hemispheres of the brain for various cognitive tasks, increasing middle-aged persons' abilities to see patterns and

<sup>9</sup> Kirasic, 99.

Willis and Schaie, "Cognitive Trajectories in Midlife," 244, 249; Sherry L. Willis and K. Warner Schaie, "Cognitive Functioning in the Baby Boomers: Longitudinal and Cohort Effects," in *The Baby Boomers Grow Up: Contemporary Perspectives on Midlife*, ed. Susan Krauss Whitbourne and Sherry L. Willis (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 215. Number abilities represent the crystallized intelligence domain; the ability to perform simple mathematical computations quickly and accurately is measured. Word fluency is assessed by asking individuals to name synonyms for stimulus words; it represents higher order cognitive skills. Memory recall measures the ability to recall lists of words under immediate and delayed conditions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Sherry L. Willis and K. Warner Schaie, "Intellectual Functioning in Midlife," in *Life in the Middle: Psychological and Social Development in Middle Age*, ed. Sherry L. Willis and James D. Reid (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1999), 238.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Willis and Schaie, "Intellectual Functioning in Midlife," 237.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Kirasic, 99, 98. See also Barbara Strauch, *The Secret Life of the Grown-up Brain: The Surprising Talents of the Middle-Aged Mind* (New York: Viking, 2010), xx, 98.

relationships and to work through complex problems to find creative solutions. <sup>14</sup> Middle-aged brains also have more trouble ignoring distracting information and details, which can be helpful when those details contribute to insights and problem-solving, but can likewise slow down the process of studying and grasping the general ideas of texts. <sup>15</sup> Whether we seem to be functioning better or less well than we did when we were younger, we tend to accentuate the positive and to be less reactive to the negative as we grow older. <sup>16</sup> In addition, midlife women are more intrinsically motivated in their studies than men or younger women, which can make a difference in how well they do in their courses. <sup>17</sup>

For some midlife women, changing hormones can have as much an impact on school success as cognitive abilities. Women vary in how they experience and respond to the physiological and hormonal changes that are associated with perimenopause and menopause: "Following menopause, many women experience a new period of developmental growth and increased energy," while others struggle with symptoms frequently attributed to menopause, such as hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, sleep disturbances, joint pain, weight gain, irritability, and depression. <sup>18</sup> According to Roberta Diaz Brinton, a neuropharmacologist at the University of Southern California,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Gene D. Cohen, *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 21; Strauch, 8, 91, 98.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Strauch, 79, 88-90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ravenna Helson and Christopher J. Soto, "Up and Down in Middle Age: Monotonic and Nonmonotonic Changes in Roles, Status, and Personality," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, no. 2 (2005): 195; Strauch, 29-32.

<sup>17</sup> Kirasic, 171.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Nancy E. Avis, "Women's Health at Midlife," in *Life in the Middle: Psychological and Social Development in Middle Age*, ed. Sherry L. Willis and James D. Reid (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1999), 137, 113.

changes in estrogen levels that accompany menopause can cause some women to feel unfocused, confused, and "generally miserable until brain chemicals stabilize." For one of my research participants in her fifties, a hormonal imbalance made her emotionally sensitive. She shared how this affected her experience of school:

I was always crying, and I can't tell you how many times I sat through Religious Education class blinking back tears because of one word that made me feel something. It wasn't anything bad. It was just one thing that clicked in my brain and the water would start flowing. It was uncomfortable. . . You could've told me a story about a bird, and it would've made me want to cry, so that I spent the rest of the class struggling against the crying and not even hearing what was being said, because I was trying to control [the tears] . . . That first semester was a mess.

Jane struggled with her emotional ups and downs until she had a "meltdown" and called her advisor. She told him, "I can't do this anymore. I'm ready to leave." They met, and somehow the subject of hormones came up. The advisor delicately suggested Jane's problem might be related to her hormones, and he shared about a female CST professor who had experienced a similar issue. Less than a week later, Jane was back to what felt normal to her, having seen a doctor and changed her medications.

According to Nancy Avis and Sybil Crawford, "Sleep difficulties among women increase with age beginning around midlife." The causes of these difficulties are undetermined, although one study found that women who were late perimenopausal or surgically postmenopausal had the highest rates of difficulty sleeping (these are times when women may have a higher incidence of hot flashes and night sweats), and that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Interview with Roberta Diaz Brinton by Barbara Strauch, cited in Strauch, 154.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Nancy E. Avis and Sybil Crawford, "Menopause: Recent Research Findings," in *The Baby Boomers Grow Up: Contemporary Perspectives on Midlife*, ed. Susan Krauss Whitbourne and Sherry L. Willis (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 90.

"older age per se was not significantly associated with difficulty sleeping." Regardless of the reason, lack of sleep negatively affects midlife women's moods and their abilities to concentrate and process and remember new information. In sum, a woman's age and physical condition is closely tied to her abilities to focus and perform cognitively in the classroom and as she engages in schoolwork outside of class.

## Key Dimensions of Midlife Women Seminarians' Lives

Even if they are not attending school, most midlife women are "extremely busy people caring for the needs of family, work, [and] community while managing multiple life events." Many midlife female students work and care for children and homes while taking classes. Unlike their younger counterparts, who generally do not have as many claims on their time and attention, these women are unable to make school the center of their lives. In recognition of this reality, the rest of this chapter will focus on various dimensions of midlife women seminarians' lives that significantly affect their experiences of theological school: sources of income, uses of time, relationships, communal involvement and support, and spirituality.

### Claims on Time, Energy, and Attention

Midlife women tend to have more responsibilities than younger people. Seminary may not be the focal point of their lives. Even if it is, other concerns may prove to be major distractions or draws on their time and energy, thus reducing what they can give to their schoolwork. This section looks at some of the concerns and time-consuming aspects of my research participants' lives, beginning with work.

Howard M. Kravitz et al., "Sleep Difficulty in Women in Midlife: A Community Survey of Sleep and the Menopausal Transition," *Menopause* 10, no. 1 (2003): 19.
 Willment, 23.

Paid work. Work consumes energy as well as time, and the amount of energy consumed depends on the type of work and the personality of the individual doing it. I did not ask the women in my study what kinds of work they did while they were in school, although most of them told me. What I did ask was, "How many hours per week have you been working while attending school?" Answers ranged from zero or a few hours on campus (in the school's library or for the writing center) to full-time work in a human resource department and as a director of development for a school. Various circumstances affected the number of hours a woman worked per week and the type of work she did. Several of the participants had continued to work at their pre-seminary occupations while taking classes, whereas others had moved long distances to attend CST and could not do so. One of the women in my study had retired before beginning theological school and another had been laid off. A third woman had lost her full-time position during her first semester of studies, which changed her financial situation dramatically. Since changing circumstances affected the number of hours some participants worked during their time at seminary, Table 9 depicts how many hours per week research participants had been employed recently. Two of the women in my study were sporadically employed, so their hours as presented here are estimated averages. As this table reveals, two-thirds of the participants were employed twenty hours per week or less, so most of the women were not working full-time while going to school.

In response to my question about hours worked per week, one of the Asian women wrote, "I'm not sure what kind of work you meant. Does it include housework too? If you meant working for payroll, I've been working for 15 hours a week. However,

if housework could be included, I've been working for 60-70 hours." This woman's comment brought to the fore the reality that, regardless of their culture or whether they work outside the home, women are much more likely than men "to be primarily responsible for child care, cooking, and cleaning." Yet, this Asian woman neglected to mention—until I questioned her—the paid church work she did in addition to her fifteen-hour-per-week on-campus job. While other participants may have only been paid for church work during their internships, many of them dedicated volunteer hours to their churches or other organizations. I did not ask about unpaid forms of work, such as housework, childcare, and volunteering, yet they can likewise be time-consuming endeavors and emotionally and physically demanding, without providing the benefits of an income.

Table 9. Hours Worked per Week While Attending School

Hours Worked/	Number of
Week	Women
0-5	5
6-10	4
11-20	5
20-29	2
30-40	2
40-60	3

Additional financial resources. For many midlife women, figuring out how to pay for school in addition to personal and familial living expenses is a major concern that can sap a lot of energy and time. In order to get a fuller picture of this stressful dimension of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Toni C. Antonucci, Hiroko Akiyama, and Alicia Merline, "Dynamics of Social Relationships in Midlife," in *Handbook of Midlife Development*, ed. Margie E. Lachman (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 576-577.

being a graduate student, I asked participants, "Besides work, what kinds of financial resources are you drawing on to get you through school (e.g., loans, scholarships, investments, family)?" Table 10 reveals that scholarships and loans are two of the three most common financial resources in addition to work. Interestingly, partnered participants were not inclined to name their spouses or partners as financial resources. One explanation might be that the wording of my question caused them to focus on how they were paying their school bills. Another possibility is that they considered their partners' work incomes to be included in the "besides work" phrase, when what I intended was "in addition to your work income." Yet, one interviewee did voluntarily mention her husband's income in answer to this question, which sparked me to ask subsequent interviewees about their partners' financial contributions. Based on the information I have, I think it is safe to assume that all thirteen women who had spouses or cohabiting partners while going to school benefitted from the financial contributions of these partners to their households.

Table 10. Financial Resources Other Than Personal Work Income

Financial Resource	Number of Women
Scholarships	14
Spouse/Partner's Work	13
Loans	10
Savings	3
Retirement/Pension	3
Parents/Family	3
Child Support	1

These statistics, however, do not give one a feel for the lives behind them.

Myfanwy wrote, "As a single mom, I find financial aid to be crucial as I pursue this

dream." One woman shared that she did not qualify for financial aid because of her work income: "But we won't have any school loans when I get out. That's a plus. Credit cards are higher than we'd like, but—it is what it is." Credit cards came into play for another woman as well, yet for different reasons:

My husband and I have pretty much been paying for my education as we go. We have incurred some credit card debt, but this has also been affected by two kids in college and offering significant support to my older sister, who is unemployed.

One of the women whose parents sent her money expressed some guilt over this; she felt that a married woman her age should not be relying on her parents for income. A single mother admitted she received small financial gifts from her congregation in addition to her scholarship money, while a single woman struggling to make ends meet shared, "People bring me food, water, and candy."

Family. When one is sharing a home with others, there are distractions, stresses, and demands on one's time, energy, and attention that one does not have living alone (that is not to say that pets cannot be troublesome and burdensome as well). Twelve participants had children living with them at the time I interviewed them or they filled out the questionnaire (see Table 11), and twelve participants were evidently living with spouses or partners. Only five of the women in my study were living alone. As noted earlier, wives tend to spend more time caring for their children than their husbands do, and young children in particular require and demand a lot of attention. Five women in my research group had children at home who were 11 years old or younger. However, these mothers were also married, so they were not the sole financial providers for their children. Four of the six mothers of teenagers were single or divorced, yet at least one of them

received child support. One of the married mothers of a teenage daughter talked about how their family managed: The daughter was taking honors classes in high school, so she as well as her mother needed to spend much of her time at home studying. Since there was no place in their small home the husband could go without potentially disturbing a student at work, he had "remote-control headphones, so he can watch TV with the sound being down, because somebody is studying everywhere in the house."

Table 11. Age and Gender of Children Living with Participants

Woman	Relationship	Age-Sex of Child #1	Age-Sex of	Age-Sex of	Total
	Status	at Home	Child #2 at	Child #3 at	Children
			Home	Home	at Home
1	Married	3.5-Female			1
2	Married	5-Female	12-Female	14-Female	3
3	Married	5-Female			1
4	Married	7-Female			l
5	Married	11-Male			1
6	Divorced	13-Male	17-Female	21-Female	3
7	Married	15-Female			1
8	Single	16-Female			1
9	Married	16-Male	18-Male		2
10	Engaged	18.5-Female			1
11	Divorced	19-Female	22-Male		2
12	Married	28 or older-Female (temporarily at home)			1

In the United States, it is increasingly common for midlife parents to have young adult children living at home, and one of my research participants, CJ, was part of this trend, with a daughter who had returned home for financial reasons. Studies have found that "most midlife parents with adult children living in the home report being satisfied

with the living arrangement and having a positive relationship with their children."<sup>24</sup> CJ expressed that she was very close to her children, and she seemed comfortable with having one of them living with her.

In addition to raising children, caring for ailing parents can be a drain on midlife women's time, money, and emotional energy. Only two participants in my study said they provided care for a parent. Ray spoke of managing two households: hers and her mother's. Doing this and school, along with trying to stay active in her sons' lives and maintain her relationship with her husband, was "really hard." Since she was an only child, her mother's healthcare, finances, "all of that is just in my lap." During Ray's first year of theological school, her mother had been hospitalized three times. Ray commented: "Yeah, she's dying. Not good. Which doesn't help the sleep pattern, either. Because, if I make it through the night, it's like, 'We didn't get any calls." CJ occasionally did some shopping for her mother-in-law, who was "in a home," so the parental care she provided was minimal.

Commuting. Another time-consuming factor in many midlife women students' lives is commuting to school. Over half (twelve) of the women in my research group commuted twenty minutes or more to attend classes in Claremont (see Table 12). Living so far from school created additional challenges for these women. They struggled to fit their courses into the least number of days possible in order to constrain the amount of time and money lost to travel. But this then limited the time they had on campus to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Rosemary Blieszner and Karen A. Roberto, "Perspectives on Close Relationships Among the Baby Boomers," in *The Baby Boomers Grow Up: Contemporary Perspectives on Midlife*, ed. Susan Krauss Whitbourne and Sherry L. Willis (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 271.

engage in other endeavors, such as finding books in the library and copying materials for classes, small-group work, meeting with professors, attending on-campus events, participating in student organizations, and developing relationships with other students.

Table 12. Location of Participants' Primary Residences during School

Where Participants Lived	Number of Participants
On Campus	3
In Claremont	2
Close to Claremont (7-15 minutes)	4
Los Angeles Area (20 minutes to 3 hours)	7
Southern California beyond L.A./Claremont area (1 ½-3 hours)	2
Out of State (Arizona and Nevada)	3

For a couple women who lived 35 to 65 miles from Claremont and took classes on Friday nights through ETSC, the commute was sometimes one to three hours one way, depending on traffic and accidents on the freeways. However, ETSC was an attractive option for both Episcopalian and non-Episcopalian women who had to work during the week and commute long distances. They were able to take classes on Friday night and Saturday during the day, thus only spending one night in Claremont and that on a weekend. Women who lived in the Los Angeles area and attended courses in the middle of the week often planned their schedules to avoid long commutes through heavy traffic. One woman shared, "I took one night class all these [five] years, and that was awful, because it took an hour and fifteen minutes." Normally, her commute time was about thirty minutes, because she traveled in the opposite direction of the heavy traffic. Another woman had occasionally taken the train—"which I love"—but she found it prohibitive in terms of schedule. Therefore, the two women who lived outside the Los Angeles area but

still in southern California sometimes had a similar commute time to people living closer to Claremont: one and a half to three hours.

A few of the women in my research group who had long-distance commutes would stay one or two nights on campus or with family or friends living nearby. Elise, who traveled from out of state, usually spent two nights in Claremont, but sometimes she stayed three nights if she had a class on the third night. She admitted, though, that there were times "I just decided I'd drive home after class, which is crazy, but . . . I like being there in the morning." She did not like being away from her children any more than was necessary. She had shared on-campus apartments with another commuter and with resident students, slept on another student's sofa for a semester, and stayed in commuter housing. Sharing apartments was the preferred option, because it allowed her a place to "keep my stuff," and she could go there any time she wanted.

Course load. Considering work and family responsibilities along with commute times, one might wonder how most midlife women manage to attend school part-time, much less full-time. In fact, when I asked, "Approximately how many credits do you take each semester?" I often received a range for an answer. Unforeseen life events sometimes intervened in women's study plans. Some women started out taking a certain course load and then decided it was too much. Others varied the number of credits for which they enrolled in relation to what courses were offered and when. Some of the variations were due simply to the reality that there were required courses ranging from zero to five credit hours per course. Table 13 depicts the number or range of credit hours for which my research participants enrolled each semester.

While most of the participants limited their course loads to nine credits or less, it was not necessarily the women with children at home, the most work hours, or the longest commutes who took the least number of credits. The two women in my study with three children at home also worked thirty to forty hours a week, commuted from out of state, and took nine to fifteen credits per semester. Some midlife women just have more energy than others.

Table 13. Credit Hours Participants Took per Semester

Credit Hours Per Semester	Number of Women
10 credit hours or less	10
11-16 credit hours	8
8-15 credit hours	3

# Relationships

In her groundbreaking book on women's psychology, Jean Baker Miller observed, "We all begin life deeply attached to the people around us." Yet, whether due to socialization or innate psychological processes or a combination of both, females generally come to define themselves "in relation and connection to other people" more than males do. Therefore, relationships and connections are highly valued by most women and are essential components of their development, growth, and sense of well-being. According to Miller, in contrast to men, "affiliations, relationships, make women

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 86.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," in *Women, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 44.

feel deeply satisfied, fulfilled, 'successful,' free to go on to other things."<sup>27</sup> Judith Jordan suggests that these feelings of well-being and fulfillment are a result of the integration achieved through relatedness.<sup>28</sup> Studies have revealed that, throughout adulthood, women maintain higher levels of need for affiliation than men.<sup>29</sup> While the time given to relationships may shift in midlife as the balance between self-focus and other-focus is reworked, the desire for affiliation and positive relationships remains strong or may actually increase.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, a lack of affirming connections with others would be an additional stress factor on a midlife woman attending seminary.

Due to the multiple social roles most midlife persons have, including child, spouse, parent, and worker, people in midlife have the largest social support networks of any age group, and women have significantly more people in their networks than men do. 31 However, the nature of relationships shifts as people change and grow through their middle years.<sup>32</sup> They have less time for socializing, so intimate relationships become more important than large social networks. Apter found that women were struck by a hunger for friendship in midlife. 33 They sought out those who would listen without judging and who would care about their experiences without identifying with them. They

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Miller, 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Judith V. Jordan, "Clarity in Connection: Empathic Knowing, Desire, and Sexuality," in Women's Growth In Diversity: More Writings from the Stone Center, ed. Judith V. Jordan (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 51.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> James and Lewkowicz, 123-24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Linda N. Edelstein, The Art of Midlife: Courage and Creative Living for Women (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1999), 74; Franz, 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Antonucci and Akiyama, 155. These authors use the concept of a "convoy of social" relations" in which "convoy members protect and defend, aid, and socialize individuals as they move through life" (154).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Apter, 240. <sup>33</sup> Apter, 304.

were more apt to look beyond differences and to come together around commonalities, instead of gathering into cliquish groups. Midlife women trusted other women more and were less worried about being hurt or betrayed, so they found it easier to reveal themselves to other women.<sup>34</sup>

Supportive and empathic relationships have been found to be significantly related to well-being. In her analysis of longitudinal data collected from 1968 to 1980, Elizabeth Paul found that positive relationships with spouses/partners, siblings, mothers, and friends were associated with more favorable general morale, healthy affect balances, positive self-concept, and lower levels of psychological symptomatology. Sharon McQuaide's research in the mid-1990s backs these findings. Midlife women in her study "who reported doing well were involved with others and felt that the changes they were going through were understood by others. Having a group of female friends or a confidante was correlated with midlife satisfaction. Similarly, Elizabeth Arnold's study participants, ranging in age from 50 to 63, "consistently identified female friends and reconnecting in different ways with family and church affiliations as important sources of support." Relationships help women feel competent, confident, and powerful.

Conversely, because relationships are centrally important to women's lives and wellbeing, it may be very difficult for a woman to return to school and normal daily life after the loss of a spouse, partner, or close friend or family member. Having other supportive

<sup>34</sup> Apter, 305.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Elizabeth L. Paul, "A Longitudinal Analysis of Midlife Interpersonal Relationships and Well-being," in *Multiple Paths of Midlife Development*, ed. Margie E. Lachman and Jacquelyn Boone James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 188-89.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> McQuaide, 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Arnold, 642.

relationships becomes even more essential at such a time.

Friendships and community. Understanding the significance of relationships in women's lives, I asked participants in my study, "As a theological student, where or how do you find community?" Responses varied in emotional tone and content, yet they all pointed to the truth that affiliating with others is essential to women. When the women in my study shared stories of feeling a loss or lack of community in their lives as students, it was evident that these were painful experiences for them. Some adjusted and found new relationships or relational patterns easily, while others struggled.

Going to seminary involves shifts in patterns of living and focus that others in a seminarian's life might not comprehend or appreciate. Time once spent in social activities may now be needed for studying. Ray shared that outside the school community, "Most other people don't understand what it means to be going back to school at this age . . . . They kind of say, 'Well, what can I do?' and I say, 'Pray, unless you wanna type.' And nobody volunteers to type." Continuing on, Ray commented on the importance of having the support of her friends: "I get lots of prayers, and I get encouragement that this is where they also see me. Whereas, if all my friends went, 'Uh, you sure?' then I think it would take a stronger will to survive through this." Plus, at school, she had "found something in common with eighty percent of the people. I have really enjoyed those relationships." While Anne remained connected with a group of friends from childhood, she found it difficult to talk with them about her studies and her faith. As an ETSC student, she was often in class or busy studying on the weekends when her friends wanted to do things together. They did not seem to understand Anne's new

schedule and commitments and felt like she was just "too busy for us." However, this sense of distance from old friends was compensated for by the "strong sense of community" Anne discovered through ETSC. Similarly, Natalie found that her friendships changed after she began attending seminary: "Some people stopped spending time with me, thinking I was crazy (or perhaps out of their fear of God or religion); others have stayed in contact but won't discuss theology with me." At the same time, Natalie developed a new relational focus: "I've become more interested in spending time with like-minded people who like to volunteer and try to solve some of the problems of the world." In naming her sources of community, she included "friends," along with her church community, neighbors, and classmates at CST.

Elise felt "a real loss of community" her first year of seminary. She had been heavily involved in church committees and groups and had found support through those, but with school, she could not be at church during the week, so she dropped "almost all" her church commitments. As a result, "I really felt this hole in my life. . . . I'd had to remove two legs of the stool that sort of held me and I was teetering a little more." Yet, she was aware of her need, so she joined the choir at CST. She also had her family, and she became close to "the folks that I go to class with," meeting with them over lunch or in between classes. "We worry about each other and pray about each other and look out for each other," she said.

During her first year of theological school, Dena lost her job and her partner of twelve years. She wrote,

My ex-partner was supportive but did not realize how deeply our lives would be affected. I believe she thought my career would remain the same, and I would be

getting the degree for personal edification. My attending seminary did not end our relationship, but certainly pointed out relationship differences.

However, Dena remained connected to people from her work sphere, who were very supportive, and she soon found a new partner, whose mother had been a midlife seminarian, so she "is very comfortable with this type of life change in midlife." In addition, she had church friends, her partner's church friends, and extended family as support systems. At school, she found she felt closest to other commuters, but due to the nature of being commuting students, "It's pretty hard to have sustained community. . . . Community here is sort of catch as catch can." Nonetheless, Dena affirmed, "I actually very much expect to remain friends with some of the people from here."

Other midlife women who commuted to school recognized the need to make a conscious effort to find community. As an older person, CJ expected to be "kind of on the outside of everything" at school, but because she had learned in her life to be intentional about forming relationships, she started off during orientation "seeking out people." She took it upon herself to make community for others by baking "cakes for people's birthdays and scratching people's backs." However, during her first year, she had decided that she was not going to join the school's choir or other groups because she had a long commute, and, "I felt like I needed to make studying my priority." As time went by, though, she "realized that that didn't work well for me spiritually, that I needed relationships more than that, so now I have a habit of going out, just one other friend, so we can really talk." Unlike these women, Momma G, another commuter student, did not discover community at CST. Commuting from within the Los Angeles area and working part-time to support her family as a single mother, she was only on campus for classes.

She did not have time, energy, or money to engage in social activities at school or elsewhere. Her pain was evident in these statements she wrote:

I have very little sense of community. I am separate from my classmates for so much of the time that I have not developed deep relationships there. My church relationships are changing as I transition to "pastor." My children and their friends are the most community I have right now. This has been a source of deep "aloneness" and isolation for the last five years.

A few of the women who commuted to school expressed some envy for those who lived on campus, because they envisioned it being easier to find communal support and to be involved in campus activities if one was already living there. However, one of the on-campus women felt very alone and isolated during her first semester of seminary. She felt outside the groups of students that she saw. In addition, she observed that "on weekends, you don't see anybody. . . . You hear people, but you never see 'em!" For another on-campus resident, her separation from others was by choice. As a seminarian, she found herself becoming more introverted and introspective. Yet, she took advantage of living on campus to attend campus events and to participate in school activities, such as trips sponsored by the Arts Council. She also became the host of dinner and study group sessions composed of people her age, which served as a source of relational as well as academic support. Two additional women spoke of becoming close to others through study groups. One of them lived on campus, and she expressed her enjoyment of being part of the small campus community:

I do like the fact that home, where I live, and the campus are almost one entity. And I like that the children are riding their bikes when they get home from school past the classroom window. And to know that some of the parents [at school], those are their children riding past the window. I like that.

Having relationships with fellow seminary students, especially other midlife

women, was significant for my participants. It meant having people who could understand and empathize with oneself, since they were taking the same types of classes, studying similar subjects, and were in similar life situations. While Pauline did not initially think she needed "any more community" when she started attending CST, her feelings changed as she discovered that "it's wonderful to be with people who are experiencing what you're experiencing. It's supportive." At CST, first-year students go through orientation and take several of the same foundational courses together. This is a bonding experience for many of them. One woman mentioned that the Vocational Discernment course required of first-year M.Div. students encouraged a lot of personal reflection and sharing that connected students with one another. Martha summed up how classes can lead to the formation of meaningful relationships: "I think the classes foster community. A lot of times there's been small classes with great discussion or small group discussion that happens in classes, and I think community happens there quite naturally."

As may be evident through the stories above, developing relationships is harder for some midlife women than for others. A couple participants stated directly that it was difficult for them to form close friendships of mutuality. One of them shared, "Having relationships and being supportive, and learning to be supported, is the hardest thing for me—I don't know how to ask for help." As a recovering alcoholic, the other woman was still

deliberately learning how to be a good friend. Having friendships with people is something new for me. I'm friendly to everybody. But those close intimate friendships, where you let someone into that deep space, the sacred place of you, and you share secrets—...

those were relationships she was still seeking to develop. For a third participant, who felt

ostracized by her cultural group, affirming and empathic connection was found in a therapeutic relationship.

In sum, midlife women find community at seminary by talking to people before, during, or after class, by forming study groups, and by attending chapel services. If they can find the time, they may go out for a meal or drinks with other students, or they may participate in school activities, choir, or other organizations. One of my study participants even named CST's writing center as her community. Midlife women seminarians tend to develop their closest relationships with people who are like them: other commuter students, other women their age, and people from their denomination or racial/ethnic/ cultural group. One Latina woman became friends with a group of African-American women her age. She shared how powerful an experience this was for her: "It's the first time women of color have adopted me as one of their own." Adult educator Elisabeth Hayes points out that "the proportion of women students itself can contribute to women's feelings of belonging as learners, and to their overall comfort with the learning environment. Women of Color are particularly likely to feel like outsiders because their numbers remain relatively small."38 Thus, forming relationships with women like themselves has a great impact on how female midlife seminarians experience theological school.

As this section has revealed, there are a variety of factors that influence whether midlife women find or create the types of relationships they need and desire as theological school students. These include personality and psychological resources,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Elisabeth Hayes, "Social Contexts," in *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning*, Elisabeth Hayes, Daniele D. Flannery, et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 32.

relational skills, time and commitments (including work and family), financial resources, and cultural or ethnic background. For many of my participants, family, church, and friends outside of school were important, even primary, sources of community while they attended seminary. The next two subsections examine the place of family, friends, and faith communities in midlife women seminarian's lives.

Family and friends. For most midlife women, family members (spouses, children, mothers, sisters) constitute their closest relationships and sources of support.<sup>39</sup> Studies have found that "positive relationships with parents contribute to a strong sense of self and emotional well-being in midlife," while unpleasant relationships can lead to stress and negative feelings.<sup>40</sup> From this it can be understood that the support of family members is important to midlife women's well-being and success as theological school students. Therefore, I asked the participants in my study, "How does your family feel about your pursuit of theological education and your goals? Are they supportive?"

Most of the participants expressed that their parents and spouses were supportive of their desires to attend theological school. Bonnie exclaimed that her family was "off-the-hook jazzed!" Her father had been a minister, and she had siblings who were also ministers. She talked about how her going to seminary seemed to generate "an atmosphere of education" in her family, inspiring several of her family members to make plans to go back to school. Similarly, Sierra's partner was very excited and proud: "She will never pass up an opportunity to tell people I'm in seminary." When Nancy called her sister and said, "I'm gonna become a chaplain," she was greeted with a "dead silence"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Antonucci, Akiyama, and Merline, 579-80, 582; Antonucci and Akiyama, 155. <sup>40</sup> Blieszner and Roberto. 272.

that lasted "for a little bit too long," before her sister said, "That's perfect. What took you so long to figure that out?" One woman's partner was "really supportive," even when they were struggling financially: "She really wanted me to do this." Martha's husband had always been supportive of whatever she wanted to do in terms of work and school. She wrote, "He has encouraged me in my studies and has willingly made financial and other sacrifices in order to make my education possible."

Julie's parents had encouraged her to enroll at CST and were "so happy" that she did her degree program. Her mother, in particular, had wanted to see her do something other than "cook and clean" for her husband while he worked toward a Ph.D. Both her husband and her parents were proud of her, she said. For Vicky, it was her parents-in-law who were "really proud" of her. They paid for her education in the belief that it would make her more helpful to her pastor husband. Her own father had always been supportive of her, no matter what she did, while her mother did not mind her going to seminary as long as her father-in-law was the one who paid the tuition.

The importance of familial support to my research participants was evident in how frequently women said family members were supportive and then added a "but." Some family members struggled to understand the meaning or significance of pursuing and obtaining a theological education. Pauline observed that several of her relatives seemed to wonder what she would do with such an education at her age: "They don't completely understand it, but they are still supportive of it. . . . supportive of education, supportive of growing, supportive of faith." One woman's parents had never attended college, so they did not understand the time she spent reading and writing for school as

real "work." "My parents are proud of me," she said, "but they don't get it." Another woman shared that her parents and siblings were supportive of her going to school (her brother was "completely over the moon about it"), but her parents did not support her going into the ministry. They did not see it as a legitimate career, partly because "you don't make any money" at it. In addition, her family members always went to her "Biblethumping" brother with their theological and church-related questions, instead of her. However, her father would reveal his pride by asking his daughter "questions that he already knows the answers to" in front of visitors. Similarly, Dena's father was "proud of my additional education but is very opposed to women or homosexuals being ordained. He is also very conservative, so he finds most of my writings in seminary horrifying. This has been very painful." Conversely, her conservative mother was "wildly supportive."

Other of the participants' family members struggled with what it meant for their mothers or wives to be going to theological school. Younger children were more likely to have difficulty with their mothers' new endeavor than older children. Vicky's preschool daughter, who was born after she started attending CST, kept saying, "I don't like this studying," because studying caused her parents to be gone from home "all the time." She did not get as much attention as she would have liked. The needs of her daughter led Vicky to give up on "writing good papers"; she would often turn in just a "first draft." Similarly, Hannah's fifth- and seventh-grade sons were not pleased at first with the time she spent studying, because it took her attention away from them. As time went on, they came to "understand the passion" their mother had for her studies. Still, they were not

willing to help her very much with household chores. Sierra's son did not really understand what she was doing and why she could not always play with him or let him watch TV, but once he reached an age at which he had more homework, they were able share study time together and commiserate about how difficult schoolwork was.

While Anne's elementary-aged daughter had struggled with why her mother was doing something that took her away from home so much, she liked the idea of her becoming a priest. Myfanwy's teenaged and young adult children were supportive, but because of her commute, she had to spend one night a week away from home. Thus, "the support level ranges from extremely enthusiastic to apathy—depending upon the day or time!" One daughter going off to college did not want her mother to move to go to seminary, because "she wanted home to stay where it was." However, the move proved to be beneficial for her younger sister; it showed her that she could handle moving to a new place and was capable of making friends at a different high school.

Sometimes, it was husbands who struggled with the changes in their wives' lives, and hence, their own. One recently married woman shared that her spouse "was in shock" over her decision to go to theological school, yet she thought he should not have been surprised. Once she was in school, he did not "understand the workload and what it takes," like staying in the school's library until nine o'clock at night. Another woman shared that her husband was "extremely supportive," yet when it came to making a commitment to take their daughter to church so she could do her internship work, her husband hedged. He was not a churchgoer, thus taking on this responsibility was a sacrifice for him. He had supported his wife in her pursuit of education and ordination

because it was important to her, not because he had any personal investment in what she was doing. It was additionally difficult for him that his wife was changing and growing in ways that he was not. Elise was proactive in ensuring that her husband felt a part of what she was doing. Along with going to seminary, she was preparing to become a Methodist minister, which would mean entering the itinerant system. She wrote,

There have been times when my husband has felt a bit lost in the process, like where does this leave him. It has been important to include him in the process as much as possible and to take time to periodically make him the focus of my attention and time.

At least one young child did not seem to have an issue with her mother going to school. Julie's preschool daughter thought "that everybody goes to school," since she and both her parents did. Her attitude was evident in this conversation she had with her mother: "I'm having fun at my school; did you have fun?' 'No, I'm tired.' 'Why are you tired? School is fun.'" Teenaged and young adult children seemed to have an easier time accepting and supporting their mothers' educational pursuits. Momma G shared, "My children were very supportive and proud. They still are." For children of all ages, the main issue that arose was not having their mothers as available to them as they once were.

Friends are like family for many midlife women who do not have partners or children. The three women in my study who were childless and had long been single discussed friends in their response to my question about familial support. When Altheia first decided to attend CST in 1979, "Friends asked me quite literally if they accepted people like me in seminary." Apparently, they were surprised that she would do such a thing. Nancy's secular friends found the narrative of her journey to seminary to be "a

wild story," yet only one of them did not "seem to be handling it very well." The hurt this friend had experienced within Christianity made it difficult for her to support Nancy's commitment to ministry within this religious tradition. All Nancy's other friends, though, were "delighted."

As noted in the previous subsection, Natalie's circle of friends changed as some distanced themselves from her because of what she was doing. In addition, Natalie's family members were not supportive of her desire to pursue a theological education. She shared that she "had been thinking about studying theology for at least ten years, but my atheist family and friends had discouraged it, saying that it was not practical." Her older sister had told her "that she thinks I've joined a cult because I work at an Episcopal school, attend an Episcopal church on Sundays, and am now attending an Episcopal/ Methodist seminary." Her mother's response was less severe: she "laughed when I told her I was taking theology classes and said, 'That just isn't you!'" It must have taken a lot of courage and conviction for Natalie to follow through on her desire to go to seminary. Other women's parents expressed concerns about the financial implications of attending seminary and pursuing a career as a minister. Momma G's mother was hesitant about her going to graduate school, because she recognized the "financial sacrifices involved," while Elise's parents were concerned about her leaving a lucrative career to go into ministry.

Based on what my research participants shared with me, support was more likely to be forthcoming when family members and friends were religious themselves and were aware of the demands of higher education, specifically seminary. Therefore, while most midlife women seminarians have close family members who are sincerely supportive, emotionally and practically, some do not. These women need to look elsewhere for sustaining relationships. Outside of school, many of them find support systems in their faith communities.

Faith communities. As with families and friends, faith communities played significant roles in many midlife women's pursuits of theological education. For most of the participants in my study, church experiences were primarily or secondarily influential in their decisions to attend theological school. Their faith communities were the reason why many sought to become ministers—they wanted to serve them. Those who were pursuing ordination frequently needed the approval of local as well as regional church bodies. Without the approval and encouragement of these bodies, there would have been no reason to go to seminary. In addition, some women looked to their faith communities and their interactions with them for continuing affirmation and confirmation of their calls, whether directly or indirectly. In order to determine how much support the women in my study received from their religious communities, I asked them, "How does your faith community view you (as a midlife woman, as a theological student)?"

Most of the participants shared that they were viewed positively by their congregations and received a lot of support and encouragement from them. Ray's church had affirmed for her that what she was doing fit who she was, and, "They think it's great. They think it's needed." Elise, in her mid-forties, heard every Sunday how proud the people in her congregation were of her. They told her they were "astounded and amazed at how I do it all" and that "they've seen this dramatic change in me." However, she

recognized that the congregation was one of the reasons why she was able to manage all the activities of her life: "It's because that whole church is praying for me. They help us do all of this. They're all there for my kids, and they've just been phenomenally supportive." Like Elise, Bonnie found that a support system developed around her as a seminarian: "They want me to finish and they know how tough it is here. So they're very, very supportive. . . . Are they giving me much slack? No. Are they supportive? Yes."

Congregations that were familiar with the journey through seminary tended to be the most supportive. Dena's faith community provided her with just what she needed as she sought to discern what she wanted to do with her theological education:

My church is pastored by a 55-year-old woman, so midlife women in leadership is very comfortable there. We're also a hundred people with probably ten graduates of seminary. So, that level of education and that experience is valued, but it's also not assumed that you'd become a pastor. So that's good. I guess I have all the benefits of the support without any of the expectation. So that's actually very good. . . . And, my particular denomination voted last summer to ordain gay clergy, so, my broader faith community is also suddenly much more accepting than they might've been.

A couple other participants were involved in congregations that were accustomed to accompanying seminarians on their journeys through school, so these women likewise felt a lot of support and acceptance in those communities.

At least one congregation had mixed feelings about sending one of its own members through seminary. Beth wrote, "They are really supportive of everything I do, but also a bit concerned, because they know that someday I will be commissioned and appointed (assuming all goes as planned) and will leave the faith community that has become my home." Other congregations did not seem to know how to view or treat their female midlife seminarians. Sierra thought she was viewed "with confusion. On the one

hand they are extremely supportive and encouraging. They pray for me." But, on the other hand, there were a lot of congregants who did not understand why she was doing this at this point in her life: "Because, I think in their mind, from the time you're born, you know that you're supposed to be in seminary. And you know what God's called you to do, and you don't make all these detours in life." Another woman, referring to her home congregation, shared, "I'm the first one in that church to have ever done this. And I'm not sure they know what to do with it." She felt that half of them were "really proud that I'm here," while the other half probably did not care. Yet, some of the older ladies in the congregation stayed in touch with her, and when she returned for a visit, the congregation was so welcoming that "it was like being the bride." People she did not even know came up to her, said "hi," and gave her a hug.

A few congregations sent their female seminarians mixed messages. One 39-year-old sensed that some older women in her spiritual community had a little bit of resentment toward her because they wished they could have gone to school at her age. Yet, a few of them expressed "pride" in what she was doing. However, while she recognized that this was an expression of support, the use of the word "pride" caused her to feel like they were taking some sort of ownership in her work, like she was their child and they were her parents. Thinking about this led her to remember questions that were asked during her discernment for ordination process that began, "As a young priest, how would you . . ." She continued, "I was like 35 at the time. If I'm ordained, I'll be 40. When do I get to at least be a middle-aged priest?" Nonetheless, she feels "valued in the community."

Another 39-year-old woman wrote that she liked to think her church community viewed her "as being young relative to most of the priests and seminarians they meet." In addition, "I think they also see me as one of them and someone who enjoys a good meal and to party occasionally," so "I feel very comfortable with how they view me."

However, being a young single woman did create some tension for her as she participated in the lives of her faith community and its members:

I do feel that I have to err on the conservative side in some areas. For example, I wore sandals with the alb at the altar one hot Sunday and an older, female parishioner asked in a critical tone, 'Are seminarians allowed to wear nail polish?' when she viewed my turquoise-painted toes. I also feel conscious about wearing tight clothing, strappy tops, or shorts around other parishioners, even at a casual BBQ or at an evening event at someone's house, because I realize that I'm representing the church at all times and can't afford for anyone to gossip about 'that single seminarian woman.' . . . . I long to be married and have a family, but it is tough to date men without criticism as a single seminarian!

In answering my question about issues related to being a midlife woman attending theological school, this woman added, "Some older people at my church and workplace still seem skeptical about the idea of female leaders in the church. I think they would be even more skeptical if I were younger, i.e., in my twenties or early thirties." Thus, ageism, or combined ageism and sexism, was an issue for a couple women, not because they were middle-aged, but because they were younger than most people in their congregations and other ministers and seminarians.

For the two women in my study who attended Korean churches, sexism was definitely an issue. People in these congregations preferred to identify their female seminarians as the "pastor's wife." Hannah realized that, as a woman, she had less authority in her church than a male seminarian would have, so she was cautious about

introducing to her congregation some of what she had learned at seminary, particularly women's theological perspectives. Therefore, while some of the people in her congregation viewed her as a seminary student, older members continued to think of her as just the "pastor's wife." Similarly, Vicky chose to keep a low profile in her congregation and sought to blend in. She was afraid that she might share some of her "liberal" theological perspectives, the gossip would start, she would be judged, and her pastor husband might "be expelled from his denomination." So, she laughed with people when they noticed the different way she talked; she let them assume she knew things about the Bible because she studied it at home with her husband; and she did not talk about her life as a student, just as a mother and housewife.

Such expressions of sexism are not limited to ethnic minority congregations, however. A United Methodist seminarian in her fifties shared the following:

I have heard just a few older persons, particularly men, who have been encouraging but who also ask questions like, "So, when you are done, will you be an associate pastor?" This is as though Senior Pastor could not possibly be an option for me.

This woman seemed to take these expressions of bias well, though. She wrote, "Nevertheless, I feel supported even by those who make such commentary. I don't feel too threatened by it, as I still don't know for sure where I will end up—anything's possible."

Another woman in her fifties expressed a similar lack of concern about how her faith community viewed her: "Never asked how they view me and I don't really care."

This statement reflects Apter's observation that "a woman's fifth decade is a turning

point, wherein she frees herself from the weight of external images and expectations."<sup>41</sup>
This particular woman was enthusiastic about her new path, and she saw her
congregation sharing that with her: "Most seem very supportive of what I am doing, are
delighted by my call to ministry and excited to see me following my call and recreating
myself at 56."

Pauline had left her long-time church community just before she began attending CST. She shared, "That community was hugely supportive of my plan, which in fact contributed to my confidence in undertaking the commitment." Entering a new faith community, she "made a conscious choice to limit my volunteer activities to focus instead on studies," knowing that "returning to school after a dramatic length of time would be a challenge." Therefore, her new church community was "barely aware of my degree work," which provided her with space to fully engage her studies and grow and mature "in love so that I might better serve the other."

Becoming a seminarian, particularly one preparing for ordination, often changes how a person is viewed by her congregation and, thus, how she perceives herself.

Kathleen noticed that, while some people still saw her as "just Kathleen," others began "giving more weight to my words," and "that's humbling." There are also increased expectations that go along with being perceived as a soon-to-be minister. Kathleen came to the realization that "oh, yeah, I'm the grown-up!" and others were relying on her to do certain things. Arriving at this awareness that one is "the adult" and has particular responsibilities is an aspect of midlife development. Psychologist Linda Edelstein writes that one of the tasks of midlife is "an acceptance of adulthood and different types of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Apter, 315.

responsibility."<sup>42</sup> In this process, "We let go of the idea that other people are the grown-ups; we are the grown-ups of the generations in our lives."<sup>43</sup> Edelstein points out that we often realize we are the adults as our parents grow older or die. With "the decline of the generation that has gone before us, the people we have relied upon, and those who have taught us and provided guidance," we recognize that we must now take their places. <sup>44</sup> The same phenomena occurs as a person moves into the position of becoming the pastoral leader of a congregation: she becomes the person that others look to for leadership and direction.

Asking participants for their congregations' views of them, I received various answers that went beyond the concept of being supported. Sometimes, a woman's attempt to describe how others saw her may have revealed more about how she perceived herself as a seminarian at that particular time in her life. Such self-perceptions might be just as influential on a woman's experience of theological school as the actual moral support received from her faith community. Psychologists Louis Cozolino and Susan Sprokay point out, "In terms of its role in self-esteem, a learner's self-narrative becomes a blueprint for action that can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy." In the same way that having a self-identity as a poor learner can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, feeling that one does not belong in seminary, for example, can lead to a lack of self-confidence that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Edelstein, 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Edelstein, 38.

<sup>44</sup> Edelstein, 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Louis Cozolino and Susan Sprokay, "Neuroscience and Adult Learning," in *The Neuroscience of Adult Learning*, ed. Sandra Johnson and Kathleen Taylor, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 110 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 16.

inhibits one's success as a student and one's growth as a minister. <sup>46</sup> Comments from members of one's religious community can thus have a significant impact on one's experience of theological school.

# Spirituality

For many people, midlife is a time of change and transformation. It is often depicted as a spiritual process that involves a letting go of past roles, patterns, and beliefs; questioning and searching for new forms of meaning and value; and turning inward and discovering one's self. The process leads to spiritual awakening, including new self-confidence and vitality, an increased awareness of the Sacred and one's interconnectedness with the world and other people, and a sense of meaning and purpose as one lives in accordance with one's discerned values. While the midlife transition may be a spiritual journey, spiritual practices may be what is needed to sustain and guide one through the experience. In her studies of midlife women, Lynn Calhoun Howell has found that, as they mourn the losses associated with changes in their lives, midlife women engage in a self-exploration process that entails the use of spiritual practices such as "prayer, intentional solitude, becoming centered, talking with friends, reading self-help books, and self-nurturing practices like spending a day in bed." Many midlife women discover through twelve-step programs a spirituality that gives them "structure, inspiration, and comfort," while others return to religious traditions they once left or seek

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Cozolino and Sprokay, 14, 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Raymond Studzinski, *Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 10-21. Shellenbarger writes that the process of seeking meaning in midlife "is regarded by Jungian psychologists as so profound that it is essentially a spiritual or religious quest" (Shellenbarger, 57).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Lynn Calhoun Howell, "Spirituality and Women's Midlife Development," *Adultspan Journal* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 53.

out new sources of religious community or spiritual direction. <sup>49</sup> Heterosexual black women are more likely than Caucasian or lesbian women to remain with the church of their childhood and to find their ministers and church communities helpful to them as they navigate midlife challenges. <sup>50</sup>

Theological school can be one of the communities that helps midlife women through their processes of re-evaluating what is meaningful to them and what their values are. It can provide them with new theological concepts and understandings of their faith traditions that are helpful or that are challenging and disruptive of what was once known and understood. In the process of going through seminary, women may feel spiritually nurtured or enlightened, confused or disturbed. These influences of theological education on midlife women's spirituality and faith will be examined in Chapter 6. In this section, my focus is on the nature of midlife women seminarians' spiritualities. I will describe the landscape of my research participants' spiritual lives based on what they shared with me. Since I asked them to describe their spiritual lives and practices in the present, these descriptions bear the impressions of their theological school experiences and any changes they may have made as a result of those experiences.

Realizing that people vary in their understandings of what spirituality is, I asked a set of questions that I hoped left room for interpretation. At the same time, I sought to obtain the fullest description possible of how participants experienced the spiritual dimension of their lives. My first question was: "Tell me about your spiritual life, whatever that means to you. What does it look and feel like? What are its contours, its

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Lynn Calhoun Howell and Amy Beth, "Midlife Myths and Realities: Women Reflect on Their Experiences," *Journal of Women and Aging* 14, nos. 3/4 (2002): 199; Howell, 54.
 <sup>50</sup> Howell, 57.

dimensions? In other words, what form(s) or shape(s) does it take?" In interviews, I usually began with just the first sentence, and I encouraged interviewees to define spirituality for themselves. My second question aimed to gather information about the active component of participants' spiritualities: "What kinds of spiritual/religious practices are meaningful to you?" I did not always receive the depth of response I sought to these questions, so, after interviewing several women, I added a third question: "What does your spiritual life mean for you?"

In answering my questions about their spiritual lives, many of the participants spoke of an immanent, omnipresent, universal, and relational sacred reality, of connection and connectedness, and of the integration of spirituality and everyday life. Dena said, "We're all part of one big thing," which she called God. Jane described that "big thing" as "a bigness of love that we can tap into; it's there for us," yet "we only have a clue" about "this hugeness." Pauline also spoke about a pervasive "love that connects us," an "essence that flows through all of us that is greater than all the differences" that divide people of various religious traditions. For Sierra, "God is just this all-inclusive spirit," who "is everywhere" and "speaks to all people." Myfanwy eloquently summed up what several of the women thought and felt when she wrote,

God is boundless and simply won't fit into the tiny boxes marked "religion" into which we humans try to force God, no matter how hard we try. . . . [D]espite the differences between people, despite the various interpretations of God, of religion, even of our place in this world, we are all connected. I can't help but sense that God truly is Love.

Perhaps going a step farther than most of the women in my study would have, Myfanwy added, "God is not only IN our relationships; God IS our relationships—to one another,

to ourselves, to the earth and to the universe around us, and even to God." However, Jackie expressed a similar panentheistic concept when she said, "God's not just me, but God is me." She understood herself to be in a partnership, an equitable and mutual relationship with God: "It's like I'm in conversation with God." Through participating in this partnership, she had been greatly blessed. Momma G found it sustaining to know "that there's always something there. I'm not alone in the pit. . . . [There's] that sense of presence, that sense of constant availability of comfort, if I open myself to it and tune myself to it." Kathleen did not speak of God or any other divine figure, but she had a sense of a spiritual network, a "deep, inner connectedness," and through connecting to that, she became connected to the pain and suffering of the world.

Myfanwy pointed to the duality implied in my use of the term, "spiritual life." She wrote, "My spiritual life is not separate from my 'mundane' life." Through her experiences practicing as a Wiccan/Pagan, she learned "to incorporate my spirituality into my life in an organic and natural way"; thus, "there is no duality between 'spirituality' and 'life." Other women expressed the same idea of sacred and ordinary as interconnected. For Sierra, "Everything is spiritual now." After going through cancer, her spirituality had "become so much more interwoven and integrated into my living, my daily life, than I really had given thought to before. . . . my entire day is a prayer." Dena expressed an understanding of spirituality as an integration of one's worldview, one's being, and one's actions in the world. In addition, it was "connection to the Divine" and "everyday joy and comfort and rest." Pauline also spoke of spirituality as "comfort," along with being "sort of a compass" for her. On a similar note, Jane shared that she did

not know how she would have made it through her first semester of seminary if she had not had a faith she could dig deep and pull out to keep her going. Likewise, Ray said that her "spiritual life is my survival. Without it, I am not here; without it, I don't have anything left." For Elise, her spiritual life was what grounded her and allowed her to be able to do all the things she did. To her, having spiritual disciplines was especially important, "so when the tough times come, they're still there."

Interestingly, a couple women interpreted my question about their spiritual lives to mean a life history of formative experiences leading to their current religious and theological locations. These stories revealed a process of meaning-making that Slee calls "narrative faithing," in which "story gives shape, significance and intentionality to experience."51 The narratives had elements of alienation from former faith communities and of seeking and finding communities that fit theologically and experientially with the women's identities and convictions. As with many of the women in Slee's study, "conflict, struggle and choice" were themes in these participants' narratives. 52

Three women began their responses with affirmative statements of belief. Momma G expressed the significance for her of a relational and egalitarian Trinity:

I believe in God. I believe in the Trinity. I really like the whole Trinitarian thing in terms of God, Jesus as Christ, and the Holy Spirit all being interwoven. None of them dominant. All equally important. All equally vital to the whole.

One of the African-American women expressed her dislike for the term "spirituality" and then proceeded to focus on faith and belief, which were for her intertwined:

I am deeply rooted in my faith. . . . I believe that God is the Father Almighty. Although, being in school, I know that the Father is a problem. But to make it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Slee, 67. <sup>52</sup> Slee, 70.

really, really simple, my Apostle's Creed says clearly what I believe in.

She recited the Apostle's Creed and then proceeded to share, as well as she could remember, a statement she said was written by the wife of a bishop in her denomination.

This statement functioned as an add-on to the Creed for her:

"I am a part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I move by Holy Ghost power. I am done with low living, sight walking, . . . I will not give up, be turned back, until I have prayed up, stayed up, paid up for the cause of Jesus Christ . . . [W]hen Jesus Christ comes, he will have no trouble recognizing me, because I am the one that he gave power."

This affirmation of Divinely-given power was expanded upon by her personal "daily affirmation":

I am a child of the most high God, and I was created for great things. I was created to excel. I was not created to be average. He has given me ability, talent, wisdom, insight, and his supernatural power. And so, I have everything I need right now to fulfill my God-given destiny.

The other African-American participant in my study began her response to my question about spiritual life with the affirmation, "I'm a child of God." Her statements of faith were less elaborate than the previous woman's, yet they shared some of the same qualities. For her, Jesus Christ came to earth "and died and rose for me and I am saved. I believe that the Holy Spirit resides in me. And I believe he talks to me." In addition, she asserted as integral to her spiritual life a divine vocation based on her experience of divine healing and God-given giftedness:

I have a divine healing. I believe that I have opportunities to be a divine instrument. I don't always tap into those because I am human. But I do believe I have a purpose that is founded on a divine purpose. I believe that what God has given me I can share with others. And I believe that in my ministries, my job is to heal, my job is to invite the Holy Spirit into a worship setting. And that my job is to proclaim the word of Christ, or the vision of Christ. . . I use "vision" because of the creative aspects of what I do.

These African-American women's affirmations share some similarities with the faiths and spiritualities of the British black women in Slee's study. For them, the Godhead was a source of power and sustenance to withstand oppression and to live out their purpose or destiny.<sup>53</sup> Being a "child of God" for my participants was an affirmation of "the value of the self over and against the values of the wider society," which sought to undermine their sense of worth and selfhood.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, the works of womanist theologians envision God as one who "cares about the lives of black women and helps them to deal with and overcome" circumstances of multidimensional oppression.<sup>55</sup> In addition, "black women identify with Jesus as sufferer, embracer of the outcast and liberator."<sup>56</sup> Thus, Jesus tends to have a more prominent role in African-American women's faiths and theologies than in white women's, and this was evident in the testaments of faith shared by the African-American women in my research group.<sup>57</sup> Besides Momma G, only two other white women expressed the importance of Jesus in their spiritual lives. One had sought a faith community that was "excited about Jesus" and had a "joy of salvation." Along with Momma G, the second woman distinguished between "Jesus" as a human, historical figure (who, for Momma G, was also divine) and "Christ" as a "component" or immanent expression of the Divine.

Regardless of whether their expressed theologies suggested an understanding of the sacred or divine as being immanent in the natural world, the majority of my research

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Slee, 75, 145.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Slee, 145.

<sup>55</sup> Monica A. Coleman, Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 32. <sup>66</sup> Coleman, 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> See Mary Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 68-69.

participants felt that being in a natural setting or communing with nature was a spiritual practice or an element of their spirituality. Talking about how her spirituality and theology "are very entwined," Momma G shared that she believed

creation is a gift from God, and God is so involved in it. So, yeah, my theology and spirituality are very intertwined, and I can have spiritual, God-thanking and praising moments looking at my cat's nose. Because I look at that as just such a gift of miraculous code writing. Because to me, that is a prayer of thanksgiving.

A sense of awe in the natural world was expressed by several other women as well:

In the springtime, I still feel leanings like, oh my gosh, this is beautiful, let's go out and worship this.

One of the most beautiful things I have ever seen in my life was the sun dancing like a billion diamonds on the gently rippling ocean in the early morning in Maine.

The earth and what the earth brings and what it offers and how it's cyclical is all to me a vision of God. And if God's anything like just looking through those trees to see the mountains, if he's anything like that, how magnificent he must be.

Nature is connected with spirituality because nature connects women with the sacred. Jackie enjoyed being outside and getting her hands in the dirt, so, "I used weeding as a therapy for myself and for spiritual time. I'd go out and think about the earth and the little bugs I saw and the roots of the weeds and their connection with God and scripture." Gardening and lawn care also provided a setting for Jackie to engage in intercessory prayer. For Beth, natural settings were where God communicated with her: "I really enjoy encountering the divine in natural settings, such as a camp or in a wilderness experience. This is where I feel God really speaks to me." Connecting with the natural world connected Myfanwy with people throughout time: her spiritual practices sometimes included "standing alone or with others under a full moon, feeling the ground

beneath my feet and the palpable air connecting me with those who stand with me, surround me, have gone before and will come in the future." Natalie's morning routine connected her to the sacred in a variety of ways, but she gave the most attention to nature. This routine gave her a sense of peace to carry her through each day:

I walk my dogs around sunrise and feel in touch with God the Creator as I walk through the hillsides north of downtown L. A., admiring the view, feeling the tall grass brush against my legs, looking out for coyotes, and admiring the flowers, snails, the humming birds, and the occasional eagle. . . . In the summer months, I swim outdoors and pray as I do laps, filled with joy as the sun beats down on me and the water feels so refreshing. I try to maintain or retreat to the peace of my mornings during the busy day I spend at work.

For Kathleen, being mindful and in touch with herself were spiritual practices. She found that she could "calm and center myself fairly quickly," just by "being and touching a tree" or "taking time to look at the moon." CJ expressed her sense of interconnectedness with the world by seeking "to be gentle" and live lightly on the earth. Thus, recycling and "watching my carbon footprint" in other ways were spiritual practices for her.

Closely tied to the idea of finding God and spiritual connection through experiences with the natural world is experiencing spirituality through one's body. Several women in my study shared that various forms of movement and exercise were spiritually meaningful for them. Four of them mentioned yoga. Nancy had practiced yoga for many years, so it was an integral part of her spirituality. She shared, "I've always had an intuitive sense about my body. But the yoga brings a very deep dimension"—it is deeply spiritual for her. She went on to explain how it was not just the practice of yoga itself that was spiritual, but "it's also what your body carries with you afterwards." Yoga "rewires" the body, and "it also opens your heart. And so the process of yoga over time is

also a spiritual thing." Yet, while she understood the tradition of yoga, she was "pretty clear that I have come to God and come to Jesus through my yoga and meditation."

Another woman shared that there were people in her church "who would die to know" that she did yoga. However, yoga was very important to her because it "helped me to walk again." She understood yoga to be "meditation while being active," and, because she was Christian, she interpreted the Sun Salutation as, "I'm not saluting the sun; I am totally opening myself up to God and his healing power and [it] moving all the way through me. I breathe in God's goodness and I breathe out all illness and sickness." A third woman spoke of "learning different expressions of worship, like using yoga as part of praise." In addition, dance was a spiritual practice for her: "Dance pretty much frees me up to praise in an alternate form."

Like Natalie, Sierra believed taking her dog for a walk was spiritual, and so was playing with the dog. Elise walked or ran in the morning and meditated while she exercised, while Martha tried to do some walking as a form of prayer. Along with Natalie, Bonnie claimed swimming as a spiritual practice. "Rest" and "sleeping in" were also mentioned as forms of spirituality by participants. Only two women mentioned fasting. For one, it was an occasional practice most likely to be done during Lent. For the other, it was a way to gain some sense of control when her life seemed "out of control": "There's just something about physical control of part of my life by [fasting] that helps quiet everything else."

Church as spiritual community figured prominently in many of my participants' spiritual lives and practices. Kathleen stated that "one part of the spiritual life is this

being involved in community. So, I have my church as community," and she has taken on various roles in that community. Like Kathleen, Elise characterized a large part of her spiritual life as attending church activities and being involved in the organizational aspects of church. Martha felt that her work to create communal connections and bring a "spiritual aspect" into her church's worship arts program for children was one dimension of her spiritual life. She expressed the significance of building and maintaining community when she stated that "the most important embodiment of Christ" in the world is "embodiment through the community."

Worship is the primary church activity that midlife women find meaningful. It is a way to "connect with the Spirit" that involves being connected with other people as well as God. The connection between worship and community was expressed by Natalie when she wrote, "On Sundays, I feel the power of the Christian community as we get together to worship." For one African-American woman, worshiping in her church's community meant coming together with others in order to be healed and renewed, so she could return to the world and deal with oppression:

I need praise and worship! I need time to commune with God in this community. . . . There is healing in our service. We come as people who are oppressed, and you've been beaten up and . . . you come into church, and the choir and the prayer and the sermon, what it does is, it puts you back together so you can go back out and face the world again. I need that. I need that. That is *crucial* to me being able to exist and survive. I can't do it without it. I've tried. I've tried. And it doesn't work.

Some women expressed that they just "really love the worship experience." Jackie shared, "I love to go to other types of worship, other prayer opportunities." She talked about attending various types of worship services from different traditions and enjoying

elements of an interfaith service that were from non-Christian traditions. There are "so many ways people are communicating with the divine. God just keeps getting bigger," she said. Talking about one church where people are emotionally and physically expressive during worship—including dancing, shouting, and crying—Jackie remarked that she was "amazed at how people are moved."

Jackie herself was moved by the Eucharist. She had a connection with and "love of the sacrament, the sacrament of Eucharist. I don't know why, but, . . . I could go every day and I would probably cry." Nancy shared that she also had "an intense experience of Eucharist" whenever she participated in the rite:

I try not to intellectualize that. I try just to go to the rail and pray. . . . I have this whole experience of Holy Spirit . . . . [W]hen I feel the Holy Spirit at church, and I feel the Holy Spirit at the Eucharist rail, I have a very visceral, I have a very physical, my Christianity is very physical. And it has a mystical component.

The Eucharist or communion was important to several other women as well. Natalie wrote, "For me, the Eucharist is the culmination of all spiritual practice, when I feel the strongest connection to God and truly feel that my prayers are answered." For Dena, sharing in the Eucharist had become really meaningful in recent years for a different reason: its community-based, "gather around the table" focus. It was not primarily "about taking the body" or a one-to-one "spiritual connection to God," and yet it was "a very spiritual, very sacred experience."

Since worship plays a significant spiritual role in many women's lives, being able to participate in the leadership of worship is additionally meaningful. Myfanwy considered "serving communion" and "acting as a liturgist in worship" to be spiritual practices. Altheia wrote, "I love worship and I love to tell God's story. I am an actress, so

I love to play all of the parts in that story to help the story come alive for people."

Small group experiences were important to a few women's spiritualities. In these groups, women were able to support and encourage one another while connecting with the Sacred. Myfanwy wrote that one of the ways she felt "connected to the Divine" was when she was "gathered with others," including her Divine Mind group. Natalie enjoyed sharing in small group experiences, and she assisted with leading a monthly small group meeting of people from her church, "where we get together in fellowship to get to know each other better and help each other travel along their spiritual journey." She also enjoyed retreats, "especially all-women retreats." A big part of Elise's religious and spiritual life was participating in the spiritually formative Walk to Emmaus program and its Fourth Day Events. Elise appreciated how the Fourth Day Events served as an "accountability group," in which she had to say "out loud, once a week," how she was doing in terms of her relationship to Christ. This challenged her to maintain a regular practice of spiritual discipline. Jackie found it meaningful to join a Bible study group with people who were marginalized and underprivileged and to listen to them talk about their lives. She described it as "a cross between Bible study and psychiatric care and social-behavioral kind of dynamics—it's amazing."

In addition to connecting with the Sacred through nature, worship, and community, most of the participants in my study connected with the Spirit directly through solitary practices, such as prayer, meditation, contemplation, journaling, and study. Various forms and types of prayer were mentioned. One woman shared, "I regularly pray with an Anglican rosary, to keep me focused. I also use the 'ACTS' form

of prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication." Another woman referenced dance as one of the "various types" of prayer she used. A few participants mentioned intercessory prayer or thinking of others as spiritual practices, revealing the importance of caring for others in their spiritualities. Some women had set times for prayer, while a couple spoke of their prayer lives as being an "ongoing conversation with God." The practice of gratitude was also referred to by a few participants. Julie spoke of using a form of Ignatius' Prayer of Examen with her family each day by reflecting on the moments they were thankful or grateful for that day. Momma G included all her thoughts and feelings in her spiritual life: "Gratitude is part of it. Whining and pissing and moaning is part of it. Because, you know, I am human."

A few women mentioned having meditation practices, and for some, this was an alternative to prayer. Kathleen shared that she had a number of contemplative practices that she used, either for focusing her mind or for opening herself up to whatever came into awareness. She had also cultivated "a sort of mindfulness" that included moving slow and being aware and noticing things. For Pauline, meditation was equivalent to reading: "My meditation is never just quiet and still and doing nothing. For me, . . . it's usually reading. But, in that quiet reading, there's something that, calmness that I give myself, that feels spiritual to me." Pauline also spoke of being alone in the quiet of sacred places as spiritual: "There's a chapel that I go to regularly that has no service. It's just a chapel you can go in and sit. And I do that. And I would say, for me, that's spiritual."

Another place that was meaningful to her was a Benedictine monastery "that physically removes me from my world. And it's very beautiful there, and it's very simple. And, so

that's a part of my spirituality." Another introvert, Beth, felt close to God when she was alone, so she tried to find time to visit an outdoor chapel, where she could focus on "listening for God." Three women mentioned writing or journaling as spiritual practices. Writing can be a form of contemplation that connects one with one's inner self and the Divine. Spiritual practices were used by a couple women for bringing the calmness needed for sleep. Kathleen referred to certain rituals that helped her go to sleep, while Jane recited the Jesus Prayer in order to distract her restless mind and relax into sleep.

For a few of the participants, prayer, meditation, and contemplation were combined with scripture reading. Natalie wrote, "I start each day sitting on my balcony reading the scriptures of the day according to the lectionary, a commentary from a book such as *Day by Day*, praying, meditating, and then journaling." Hannah said that she tried to read the Bible every day. She would read and reflect on a biblical passage and pray on it to hear what God was saying through it. Myfanwy mentioned *lectio divina* as one of her spiritual practices.

Reading and study in general, along with discussion, were noted as spiritual practices by a few women. As with Pauline, reading was a spiritual practice for Beth and Momma G. Beth said she enjoyed "spending time reading and reflecting." Momma G liked to read spiritual growth books and inspirational stories, which "assure me that, yes, God is present in this world." Sierra claimed that "being in class is spiritual. I feel more essence of spirituality when I'm in class than when I'm in Chapel [the weekly worship service on campus]." Dena loved the intellectual study of religion: "I could so be the ivory tower theologian—I would love it!" She also enjoyed talking about personal beliefs

and theological concepts with her partner. Similarly, Altheia wrote, "I think learning is a spiritual experience. Teaching folks to think theologically and listening to them discover their thoughts is a spiritual experience for me as well."

As with Altheia, several women considered their ministries, in their various forms, to be aspects of their spiritualities. Some of these have already been mentioned.

Dena found contemplating end-of-life questions with people in her care as a hospice chaplain to be spiritual, while "listening to those who need someone to listen" was spiritual for Myfanwy. Part of being in partnership with God for Jackie was being God's hands and feet and reaching out to whomever God directed her to help. Vicky considered her spiritual life to be about living out her ethical-theological perspective and engaging in action for social justice.

The spiritualities of the women in my study shared many of the characteristics that have been found to be common among women from various religious traditions.

They had a sense of the immanence of the sacred in the world and of the relational, interconnected nature of ultimate reality; therefore, the ordinary revealed the sacred to them. This understanding was tied with spiritual practices that were relationally-oriented, embodied, and focused on connecting with the earth and its creatures. 

Attending church and being part of a faith community were important, as were rituals that involved the senses, invited participation, and were revitalizing and life-affirming. 

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1; Slee, 137, 152.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes, *Defecting in Place:* Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 187; Slee, 136, 138.

<sup>60</sup> Winter, Lummis, and Stokes, 187, 188.

Connecting with the Divine through the traditional spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, and scripture reading was also a part of the lives of most of the women in my study. While a few of the participants talked about living or acting in the world in accordance with their spiritual convictions and values, there were not a lot of references to justice and healing work, yet these have been major themes in the literature on women's spiritualities. 61 Nonetheless, the characteristics that I found in participants' descriptions of their spiritualities all fit within the category of a "relational spirituality," thus supporting the arguments of feminist theologians that "women's spirituality is embedded in a profound sense of relationality."<sup>62</sup>

### Summary

In this chapter, I have created some pictures of what midlife women bring with them into theological school classrooms and how theological education fits into the constellations of their lives. Midlife women come to seminary with a variety of work experiences and educational backgrounds. A significant percentage come from business and science backgrounds that require very different styles of thinking and writing than what is expected of students in seminary, but most have focused at least part of their previous studies in the social science and liberal arts fields. However, educational background may not make much of a difference when one has been away from school for an extended period of time. The majority of the women in my study had not taken higher education courses in five years or more. Nonetheless, research on middle-aged people's cognitive abilities indicates that midlife women are functioning as well if not better than

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Slee, 138; Bednarowski, 1; Carol Ochs, Women and Spirituality, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lanham. MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 11. 62 Slee, 136.

they did when they were younger, although they are probably slower in processing input.

Since most of the women in my study worked less than halftime, scholarships, loans, and income from a spouse or partner were essential to them being able to afford to go to school. While none of my research participants were simultaneously caring for ailing parents and raising children, several of them had young children at home while going to school. Having a mother who is busy with school, and sometimes work as well, can be difficult for children, especially those who rely on their mothers as their primary caretakers. Mothers also feel the emotional burden of giving their children less attention than they are accustomed to. A couple participants in my study shared that there were times when they chose the needs of their children over the impulse to excel in their schoolwork. Adding to the stress on family relationships and finances is the time and money spent on commuting to seminary. Due to long-distance commutes and class schedules, a few of the women in my study were away from home and partners or children one or two nights each week or every other weekend.

Relationships are important to women throughout their lives, and this is no less true for midlife women seminarians. However, it can be difficult to find and maintain meaningful relationships as a theological school student, because people unfamiliar with this type of educational experience cannot understand what one is going through. In the new, difficult, and sometimes confusing context of seminary, midlife women in my study found sharing with other women seminarians their age to be encouraging, comforting, and nourishing. Outside of school, most of my research participants had partners, parents, siblings, or friends who supported them in their pursuit of a theological education.

Church communities were also generally supportive of midlife women seminarians, although a few of my participants experienced a bias against female religious leaders, particularly ones under 45 years old.

Many midlife women rely on spiritual understandings and practices to ground and sustain them and to keep them physically and psychologically healthy during their time as theological school students. Spiritual practices that many of my research participants held in common included connecting with nature, prayer, meditation, scripture reading, participating in worship, and doing yoga. Several of these women carried with them a sense of the immanence of the Divine in the world, an awareness of the interconnectedness of all reality, and an understanding that everything is or can be considered spiritual. One woman even named the interview as a spiritual experience: "This is spirituality—what we're doing now, having this conversation and exploring all these topics. There is a spiritual sense to that. I feel a sense of the divine with us, in this conversation." However, only a few women mentioned intellectual exploration, studying, or being in class as dimensions of their spirituality. Having described the context for my research participants' experiences of theological education in this chapter, I will focus in the next chapter on what these experiences were.

#### **CHAPTER 6**

### Women's Journeys through Theological School

Chapters 3 and 4 explored the experiences and events that contributed to research participants' decisions to attend theological school. Chapter 5 examined various factors that influenced these midlife women's experiences of seminary, including their preparedness for theological studies, their lives outside of school, their relational support systems, and their spiritualities. This chapter focuses on the participants' journeys through theological school. Since goals and expectations form the lenses through which people approach and evaluate their experiences, I will begin by reviewing the participants' goals in attending seminary and thus, what they hoped to receive or gain from their educations. The second division of this chapter will describe and analyze the research participants' experiences and preferences as theological school students, specifically their preferred teaching-learning styles, the traits they found most helpful in professors, the courses that were the most meaningful and challenging, their feelings regarding assignments and grades, and their experiences with class participation, bias, and prejudice. The third division of this chapter will look at the effects of theological education on midlife women's views of their religious traditions, their theologies and spiritualities, their personal growth and views of themselves, and their perspectives of other people and the world. Based on the data reviewed in the second and third divisions, the fourth division will examine participants' ways of knowing from a developmental perspective.

# Women Seminarians' Goals

To understand midlife women's evaluations of their theological school experiences, it is important to know what their goals in attending seminary were. One's aims and hopes influence one's expectations and affect how one perceives what one is experiencing. Therefore, I asked participants, "What is your goal in attending CST? What do you want to get from your time at CST?" A few of the women shared that their experiences while in theological school had modified or changed their original goals and desires or brought them to a place of questioning what they wanted to do. This is significant as well, because it reveals one way that theological education may affect midlife women's lives.

Ten of my twenty-one research participants had come to CST with the goal of earning M.Div. degrees in order to become ordained congregational ministers (pastors or priests). In speaking of this goal, a few of them shared their desires to gain the sort of "academic knowledge" and preparation for ministry that theological school can provide. After several semesters of theological education, however, two of the nine women were questioning whether ordination and pastoral leadership were the paths for them.

When I interviewed Sierra, she was trying to discern whether she wanted to pursue ordination or not. She was passionate about adult religious education and social justice, and she could engage in this work as a lay person. But, she continued to feel that "the one thing that I definitely have a call to is communion, and in order to do communion, the denomination requires ordination." In addition, "volunteer work doesn't really pay the mortgage." Sierra also lamented that she had not followed through on what

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> See, for example, the stories of Elise, Beth, and Myfanwy in Chapter 3.

she had discerned as her "vocational call" in her first-year Vocational Discernment class: "to be a chaplain." Instead, she had thought that she "really wanted to do something else." The conflicts involved in Sierra's discernment process point to the transitional place she was in. Myfanwy's story was similar to Sierra's. She came to seminary with a strong sense of being called to ordination. She was not sure at the time why she had this call or what she was specifically called to do. "In the end," she wrote, "though I know that I have been called to use my gifts to serve God and God's people, I don't know if it is to be in the capacity of an ordained person." Yet, like Sierra, she also had a pragmatic goal of being able to earn a living doing "something I love" after she graduated.

A couple of the participants found themselves being drawn toward ordination as a result of their theological school experiences. When Martha started, she just wanted to "dabble," "take one class," and "see what it was like." She was talked into signing up for three classes her first semester, and "I just kind of jumped right in at that point, so, I don't know how, but that sort of sucked me in." Then, being in an "environment where everyone else is doing that," and having some people suggest that she consider pursuing ordination, she began contemplating this possibility. She discovered that the role of a Methodist deacon fit with her sense of call to education and pastoral care. At the time I interviewed her, she also wanted to "explore chaplaincy and maybe hospice" work. Dena did not come to theological school with the intent to be ordained, but she was "reconsidering this." She was attracted to "a job as a pastor," because "when a pastor walks in a room, everybody knows who they are and what they do," and she liked to be in positions where her role was clearly defined. In addition, her denomination had "recently

started ordaining gay and lesbian clergy," opening up the possibility that she, as a lesbian, could be ordained.

For one of the women in my research group, earning an M.Div. and becoming ordained were just the first two steps in achieving her goal; she believed she was called to continue on to law school to earn a J.D.: "I would never go to law school without coming here, or the other way around. They felt very meshed together." Four of the participants were pursuing M.Div. degrees in order to become chaplains, and three of them were planning to be ordained. Of these women, one had experienced some changes in her goals as a result of attending CST. This participant had come to theological school with the intent to pursue a Master of Arts degree with an emphasis in pastoral care and counseling. But her classmates and her advisor all told her she should do an M.Div., and her church began requiring it for ordination, so she changed degree programs. Then she attended a seminar about chaplaincy work. Before, she "had no idea that chaplains were not from the military." At the seminar, she learned about the "day-to-day ministry" of hospital chaplaincy, was attracted to that, and decided she wanted to become a chaplain. However, she was still determined to continue pursuing her original goal of going on for a doctorate in pastoral care and counseling.

Pauline also changed degree programs—twice. She came to CST with a longing to gain academic authority for her work as a religious educator, so she sought to gain a deeper understanding of the Bible and the historical Jesus. She originally signed up for the M.Div. degree, but then she thought, "Religious education is what I've always been involved with. That's been my interest, . . . So I really should do that because I need

those kinds of credits." Then, as she was nearing the completion of a master's degree in religious education, she realized that she wanted to study the Bible more and take some counseling courses, and before she knew it, she was back to wanting to take courses in the various areas required for an M.Div. She said to herself, "Okay, I will do the M.Div., and it'll prepare me well for teaching."

Natalie came to seminary with a sense of being called to be a lay leader in her church and with a desire to understand her faith more fully so she could describe it to others. However, she also wrote that she was "still discerning whether or not to be an ordained priest." At the time she filled out my questionnaire, her discernment process had brought her to the point of saying, "I now feel strongly that God is calling me to complete the M.Div. and to take an active role in my church as a sub-deacon, as a preacher, and a teacher, even though I do not feel a calling to ordained ministry."

In her studies at CST, Vicky sought to learn about human psychology and to gain knowledge and understanding that would allow her to be more helpful to her church and the larger Christian community. Julie was motivated to pursue a graduate degree by her desire to improve her English skills. Underlying this desire was a deeper yearning to do something for herself and to grow into a "better person."

In sum, most of my research participants had approached or were approaching their studies with a desire to gain the skills and academic preparation necessary for ministry and service. In addition, many of them had a desire to learn and grow in their understandings and knowledge of the Bible and theology. These desires oriented their perspectives of their theological school experiences. Such practical and narrowly-directed

aims are common among midlife adults. Kegan suggests that the goals higher education generally has for young adults—"the fundamental growth of the mind, transformational learning, qualitative changes in *how* the student knows, not just *what* the student knows"—may not be relevant for midlife adults "who come to school to better meet the practical demands and responsibilities of real adult life but do not necessarily have the luxury of 'finding themselves,' 'learning for learning's sake,' or pondering great abstract questions divorced from real-life concerns." The practical orientation of these older students can be frustrating for professors who find these students lacking in "patience for reflective attention to the bigger philosophical questions" to which they have dedicated their academic careers.<sup>3</sup>

However, as academic institutions focused on educating future practitioners of religious professions, seminaries are faced with the task of incorporating "cognitive, practical, and normative" dimensions into their preparatory programs. These dimensions of professional education—a "complex of knowledge, skill, and ethos"—were once integral to apprenticeship learning and only became differentiated when "professional training of physicians, lawyers, and clergy moved into the university." As a result of professional preparation entering the domain of the academy, the integrated balance of these three dimensions became tilted in favor of the cognitive. Therefore, in theological schools, a tension exists among forming students intellectually, teaching them practical

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 273.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Kegan, 272.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> William M. Sullivan, "Introduction," in Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination, ed. Charles R. Foster et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Sullivan, 5.

skills, and shaping their professional identities and values. This tension must also be taken into consideration when examining midlife women's experiences of theological school.

## Experiences and Preferences in Theological Education

Courses are the central component of the graduate theological school experience, especially for midlife women, who often do not have time for extracurricular school activities. Through the lenses of my research participants' experiences and comments, this division of the chapter explores and examines middle-aged women seminarians' preferences in terms of structures for learning and teaching, professor characteristics, courses, and assignments. In addition, I will discuss participants' experiences with expressing themselves in classes and with prejudice and bias, both in courses and in the larger theological school context.

### **Teaching-Learning Styles**

Students' preferences for particular ways of teaching and learning play a major role in whether they like a class and feel they are learning. Participants in this study were asked, "What kinds of teaching/learning styles do you prefer (e.g., lectures, class discussions, practical activities, a mixture)?" Sometimes, this question elicited comments about learning through reading and writing assignments and tests. For this section, I will focus on responses that related to preferred modes of teaching and learning during class time. Favored methods of learning that related more to assignments and applications pursued outside of class will be discussed in the section, "Assignments and Grades."

Most of the midlife women students in my study wanted classes to be structured

and to have a clear sense of direction. One participant said, "I know I don't like it when it's all free-flowing." Rachelle was more specific:

I prefer a structured learning environment to a non-structured one. That can be a lecture, discussions, or activities. But I do not get as much out of class discussions that are not focused in some way. I also appreciate when the class activity or discussion is tied to the reading, rather than simply on some random topic.

Similarly, in their epistemological research with a diverse group of 135 women, Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule found that "all of the women we interviewed, even the most rebellious, wanted some structure in their educational environments." In their research group and mine, women talked about needing clear expectations and a sense of direction and focus to their learning. Diversions from the topic of a particular class were not appreciated. Referring to "women who return to the classroom," Kirasic states that some women express a desire "for a clear-cut course with externally imposed structure, a class with a clearly articulated curriculum." However, other "midlife women entering college want to be set free with the opportunity to establish their own structure and to find their own timetable." With the exception of CJ, who wished she had been given more freedom to design her own curriculum, a desire to create their own structures and timelines was not something that was directly expressed by women in my study.

As Rachelle suggested, various methods can be used while maintaining structure. Several women said they liked having a mixture of teaching approaches utilized in the classroom, and they appreciated having a variety of learning styles engaged. In the case

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Belenky et al., Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 204.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Kirasic, 169.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Kirasic, 170.

of at least one participant, this was needed to keep her awake: "I need variety. 'Cause if you're just gonna talk to me, I'm going to go to sleep. Keepin' it moving" is important. Pauline shared that she liked all the different teaching styles, because what mattered was that the professors taught in the style best suited to them:

For some teachers I've had that are just lecture, I've enjoyed it. They're very good at it. That's what they do best. And if they try to do a lot of breaking into groups and doing all that, it probably wouldn't go as well, because it's not who they are. So I think professors do what they're good at, so I don't mind.

Here Pauline expressed the assertion of renowned educator Parker Palmer: "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." When there is coherence between who the teacher is and the methods she or he uses, "good teaching" results. On a similar note, while Momma G really liked guided class discussions, she observed that this method "does not lend itself to every type of class. Bible classes tend to be more lecture oriented, understandably." Based on my research participants' desires to learn biblical content, I would conclude that, for Momma G and other students, it is not the subject matter of the course per se that seems to lend itself to a particular type of teaching method, but what they expect to get out of the course.

The preference for a variety of teaching methods applied to my research group as a whole. This accords with adult educator Daniele Flannery's observation that "statistically, in previous research, most differences in learning style are greater within

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 10, italics in original.

each gender than between the genders." <sup>10</sup> Many of the participants in my study shared that they liked lecture, discussion, or a combination of the two. Some expressed a desire for more use of technology and creative, kinesthetic, or hands-on learning activities. In terms of lecture and discussion, a few women shared that they liked to have a lecture followed by whole-class or small-group discussion. Two of the women were clear that they wanted the lecture to summarize the main points for discussion. One of these women talked about how she liked to have the professor interpret the reading assignment for the day, so those who may not have had the prior knowledge needed to really understand the text could have their understanding structured in a way that would guide them in the class discussion.

A few other participants, like Rachelle, felt that class discussions ought to have focus and direction. However, as Jackie noted, small group discussions based on reading assignments do not "work at all if people haven't read the material." One woman, though, seemed to prefer less structured discussions. She said that she enjoyed "the informal type of discussion, where the teacher does not call on a student cold, but allows the conversation to occur organically." Several of the participants expressed appreciation for the interactions they had had with their classmates and the enriching conversations that had emerged in small and large group discussions. Dena shared, "I always cringe when we need to break into small group discussions, and yet, I have had very positive experiences in virtually every small group discussion I have ever had." Natalie wrote that she generally enjoyed class discussions "because of the rich variety of experiences of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Daniele D. Flannery, "Connection," in *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning*, Elisabeth Hayes, Daniele D. Flannery, et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 137.

other students. Class discussion becomes tedious if it's the kind of discussion I could have with friends and family outside of church." On a similar note, Devorah stated,

I have . . . learned that I learn from my classmates. So, when my classmates have an opportunity to share something from their experiences or some insight that they've gained or something that struck them from the reading, then I learn something.

Jane expressed a preference for small group discussions because then everybody in the group is likely to share. Otherwise, there are "four people in the class, and they're the only four that will talk." In addition, she found that small group discussions challenged her to struggle with information, to "pull it apart," and to make "it real for yourself." Dialogue compelled her to put her ideas "into words, into a cohesive thought."

Three themes commonly found in feminist pedagogies suggest reasons for women's preference for a discussion approach to learning: how knowledge is constructed, voice, and authority/power.<sup>11</sup> Flannery states that a number of studies in different contexts have found that women prefer to learn through interactions with other people, especially when they involve collaborative relationships of support and care.<sup>12</sup> My research participants expressed a preference for small group discussions rather than whole class dialogue. As Jane indicated, more interaction takes place in small groups.

Another woman observed that people are less likely to respond defensively or hostilely in small groups, "because it's a smaller group and we've gotten to know each other as the semester has progressed, and there's been a safety net built in." Therefore, in small groups, people are "usually more receptive" to different opinions and perspectives.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Elizabeth J. Tisdell, "Feminist Pedagogies," in *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning*, Elisabeth Hayes, Daniele D. Flannery, et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 156-57.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Flannery, "Connection," 124-25.

Belenky and her colleagues make the same observation: "In a community, unlike a hierarchy, people get to know each other. They do not act as representatives of positions or as occupants of roles but as individuals with particular styles of thinking." In small groups, ideas and beliefs become associated with particular people and gain a personal face that is more difficult to demean or demonize.

Adult educator Elisabeth Hayes argues that dialogue "plays a prominent role" in helping women give voice to their continuously forming identities. <sup>14</sup> She explains that the experience of dialogue is particularly meaningful for women because it is integrative of the physical and the emotional as well as the cognitive:

Dialogue helps us experience ourselves and our voices as they are created. The experience of dialogue is a powerful source of learning because it engages us on physical and emotional as well as intellectual levels. We can hear our voices as we speak them and they are reflected back to us in the voices of others. We can feel our own emotions as well as hear them in our voices and feel the emotional reactions of those with whom we speak.<sup>15</sup>

Hayes suggests that the forms of dialogue that are best suited to facilitating the development of women's voices are ones that emphasize "understanding and appreciating others' perspectives through careful listening and responsive questioning." Hearing and appreciating the expression of diverse experiences and perspectives is a theme that runs through my research participants' statements. Voice as an expression of identity includes being able to put into words one's own ideas and thoughts and knowing oneself as one who knows. Jane's comments suggested that she was finding her academic voice through

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Belenky et al., 221.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Elisabeth Hayes, "Voice," in *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning*, Elisabeth Hayes, Daniele D. Flannery, et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 100.

<sup>15</sup> Hayes, "Voice," 100.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Hayes, "Voice," 100.

small group discussions, in which other students were more likely to support and encourage her expressions of voice than in a whole-class context. She was also learning to think critically. Stephen Brookfield, who has written extensively on critical pedagogy, observes:

Of all the methods used by seminary teachers to develop critical thinking by students on matters of faith and pastoral practice, it is discussion that is touted as the most appropriate. Discussion-based classrooms appear to equalize student-teacher power relationships, to affirm the validity of students' opinions, to get learners used to grappling with diverse (and sometimes contradictory) perspectives, and to encourage students to take responsibility for the development of their own judgments.<sup>17</sup>

The use of class discussions alters the power relationships between teachers and students by giving students voice. When students are free to express their voices, then it becomes possible for students, with their particular experiences and perspectives, to become authorities alongside professors—the third theme of feminist pedagogy that I mentioned. To not only discover one's voice but to find that one's voice is authoritative is empowering for women. Recognizing oneself as having epistemological authority puts one in a new developmental location and leads to further growth, concepts that will be explored further in the division on participants' ways of knowing.

A few participants preferred lecture by itself, and a couple of them named the reason for this as being that they were auditory learners. For Natalie, it was "because it's an efficient way to take in information from the professor." Another woman indicated that since professors are the experts, she wanted to hear what they had to say, rather than other students' ideas. She felt she learned much more from lectures. Similarly, Pauline

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Stephen D. Brookfield, "How Do We Invite Students into Conversation? Teaching Dialogically," in *Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts: Promises and Contradictions*, ed. Mary E. Hess and Stephen D. Brookfield (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 2008), 32.

shared, "Sometimes it is just a pleasure to just listen to a lecture, to hear somebody's knowledge." However, a few participants noted they did not like lectures that entailed reading notes that had been handed out to the class or that simply reviewed assigned reading material. Dena wanted to have "additional material" given, while Jane found it helpful to have professors "unpack" what was read, to examine it and analyze it. One participant felt that lectures were "dry" when they were simply about giving information that the students were going to have to "spit back" later on a test.

In sum, there were a few different reasons that some participants preferred lecture to other teaching methods. One is learning style, and another is that they wanted to hear and absorb the knowledge the experts had to share. The latter reason stands in opposition to liberative and feminist pedagogies that seek to displace the hierarchical authority and power of the teacher and move toward egalitarian communities of learning. Rather, these students appeared to be naming a preference for the traditional and familiar "banking" method of education in which an educator "cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons in his study or his laboratory" and then "expounds to his students about that object." In this style of education,

The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor do the students practice any act of cognition, since the object towards which that act should be directed is the property of the teacher rather than a medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students. <sup>19</sup>

The banking model is a result of what Palmer calls the "objectivist myth," in which

truth flows from the top down, from experts who are qualified to know truth (including some who claim that truth is an illusion) to amateurs who are qualified

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, new rev. 20<sup>th</sup>-anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993), 61.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Freire, 61.

only to receive truth. In this myth, truth is a set of propositions about objects, education is a system for delivering those propositions to students; and an educated person is one who can remember and repeat the experts' propositions.<sup>20</sup>

Jane, however, indicated that she wanted to do more than receive knowledge. She wanted to witness professors' thinking processes, so she could learn how to create knowledge by engaging texts analytically and critically. Thus, she wanted to become part of a "community of truth," in which the subject matter, rather than the expert professor, is at the center of the learning process and both students and professor are knowers with access to the subject of knowing.<sup>21</sup>

Utilizing various media can be educationally enriching. One woman said she loved multimedia teaching approaches. A couple participants mentioned enjoying it when professors showed YouTube videos, and one added that she liked it when music or poetry was shared as well. Another woman said she was "very visual," so she needed "visual aids." Ann appreciated it when PowerPoint presentations of lectures were sent to students in advance of class. This allowed her an opportunity to work with the material in the presentation in a way that aided her learning, and she could see where the lecture was going. A few women were clearly kinesthetic learners. They needed to be able to touch and manipulate objects and to engage their bodies in order to facilitate their learning. Nancy shared, "I prefer hands-on projects out in the field. I don't like sitting for three hours in a classroom listening to a lecture." Another woman wrote that she liked being given "practical activities that can be taken out of the classroom, i.e., leading a small group at church, running a retreat, or preaching on a Sunday morning."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Palmer, 101.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Palmer, 101-03.

Knowing through the body and through personal experience are commonly considered female ways of knowing. Women in Belenky and her colleagues' largest group of knowers, subjectivists, favored "learning through direct sensory experience or personal involvement with the objects of study."<sup>22</sup> Many of the women in the study also "described as 'powerful' the opportunities for experiential learning provided by their institutions."<sup>23</sup> Thus, my research participants' expressed preferences for embodied and experiential ways of knowing are shared by many other women. However, these ways of knowing have traditionally been subordinated in higher education because of their association with femininity. Feminist researchers Elizabeth Debold, Deborah Tolman, and Lyn Mikel Brown argue for a concept of "corpo-rationality" in which the body is brought into knowing, that is, the mind is not separated from the body in the process of coming to know, but rather, is a means to knowing. <sup>24</sup> "Creating a corpo-reality or corporationality," they suggest, will "begin to deconstruct the categories of gender that have engendered our social worlds."<sup>25</sup>

### **Professors**

As the people who plan and structure courses and lead individual class sessions, professors are key players in midlife women's experiences of theological school coursework. To uncover what traits research participants found desirable in their professors, one of the questions I included on my questionnaire and in interviews was,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Belenky et al., 74.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Belenky et al., 203.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Debold, Deborah Tolman, and Lyn Mikel Brown, "Embodying Knowledge, Knowing Desire: Authority and Split Subjectivities in Girls' Epistemological Development," in Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by "Women's Ways of Knowing," ed. Nancy Rule Goldberger et al. (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 102, 116.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Debold, Tolman, and Brown, 116.

"What qualities are helpful in a teacher?" By sharing the teacher qualities they found most helpful, participants also revealed what characteristics they valued in educators and the educational context. Frequently, participants shared more clearly what they appreciated about professors as they discussed courses that were challenging, helpful, and meaningful. Some of these comments are included in this section.

The helpful teacher quality that the women in my study group mentioned the most often was knowledge about one's subject matter. Suzanne expressed the sentiments of many when she stated, "I have been blessed by some of the most brilliant scholars that one could ask for." In speaking of professors' knowledge, participants used words like "extensive," "strong," and "deep," in addition to "brilliant." This emphasis on knowledge points to the importance of exhibiting what Brookfield calls "teacher credibility." In Brookfield's experience as an educator, "Students continually stress their desire to be in the presence of someone whose knowledge, skill, and expertise mean that they can help students come to grips with some of the contradictions, complexities, and dilemmas they are experiencing." Most of the helpful traits that research participants named and that will be discussed in this section are signs of teacher credibility or teacher authenticity, which means being seen as personally trustworthy, "real flesh-and-blood human beings with passions, frailties, and emotions."

Like the participants in the Women's Ways of Knowing (WWK) study, women in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 163-64.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Brookfield, Skillful Teacher, 164.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Brookfield, *Skillful Teacher*, 164.

my research group were resistant to "disimpassioned knowing." They found it particularly meaningful and helpful when they could see that professors were passionate about their subject matter and had integrated their academic understandings into their own lives and practices. One participant observed, "That's their life work; that's what they do; they understand the questions. And so they know how to answer the [students'] questions, because it's almost like they've had those questions, and have struggled with them." These professors were considered "good teachers" because "a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work." The professors had found their vocations, and this fueled their passion. By teaching from a place of integrity, they were able to connect with their students. Passion and enthusiasm for one's material is contagious; it inspires students to want to learn, as Altheia expressed: "When the teacher loves what he or she is teaching and is passionate about it, I will get on board and go wherever they take me." When teachers are passionate about their material, they tend to be more "engaging" and have a more "interesting presentation style," qualities that were also valued by participants.

As observed in the previous section, participants frequently spoke of a desire for organization and structure in their courses. They wanted professors who were well-prepared and "really organized," who knew what their goals were and taught to those goals, instead of talking about whatever came to mind. One participant complained about a professor who "meanders" and "would spend five weeks repeating himself." Thus, he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Nancy Rule Goldberger, "Introduction: Looking Backward, Looking Forward," in *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by "Women's Ways of Knowing,"* ed. Nancy Rule Goldberger et al. (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Palmer, 10. <sup>31</sup> Palmer, 30-31.

expected to be familiar with for their papers and exams. It "was frustrating," the participant said, because, "I didn't get the knowledge that he has to give, which is vast." Similarly, CJ shared that she liked "a good strong syllabus and then, adherence to that syllabus." Such adherence demonstrates respect for students, because syllabi are a contract between professors and students as to what a class is going to entail. While Jackie appreciated "flexibility" on the part of a professor—particularly a willingness to listen to students' concerns and desires and to make adjustments accordingly—she, like CJ, recognized the significance of the syllabus: "If we get more than a whole class behind, then flex again and change the syllabus." In addition, shared Ray, a "good syllabus" is "thorough" and helps "you see where you are going" and "where you have been." A good syllabus also reminds students of the readings for the class when it comes time to write a paper, and it is available electronically in case the paper copy is lost. Echoing these comments, church history professor Garth Rosell writes:

In designing our courses, we need to be absolutely clear as to our expectations for students in the class. The syllabus, I am convinced, should be seen as both a legal contract and a moral covenant with our students. We should require nothing that is not recorded there in writing. We should honor all that does appear. And we should strive to be as precise as we can regarding dates, times, topics, assignments, and standards for evaluation.<sup>32</sup>

Belenky and her colleagues point out that many women have been taught that in order to be "good girls," they need to be "nice," and "nice girls fulfill other people's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Garth M. Rosell, "Engaging Issues in Course Development," in *Practical Wisdom: On Theological Teaching and Learning*, ed. Malcolm L. Warford (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 192.

expectations."<sup>33</sup> Yet, I did not hear the women in my research group saying that they wanted professors' expectations to be clear so they could be "good" and fulfill those expectations. Rather, they were playing the academic game in which they had to live up to teachers' expectations in order to get "good" grades.<sup>34</sup>

Various teacher qualities that the participants thought were helpful pointed to their valuing of relationships and connection. They were grateful for professors who genuinely cared about their students and took an interest in them; who were "approachable" and related to students with respect and sincerity, not condescendingly; and who encouraged them and wanted them to learn and be successful in their classes, even if it meant helping a distraught student put ideas together for a paper that was two weeks overdue. The latter was an act of "grace" that demonstrated the professor's ability to relate to students' struggles. A few other women expressed appreciation for professors who understood midlife women's "life situations" and that "sometimes allowances must be made for life events." One mother was touched that a professor not only allowed another student to bring her baby to class, but "if she would make a sound, he would incorporate it into what he was saying and respond to her." On a similar note, some women in the WWK study were grateful for teachers who respected students' "own rhythms rather than imposing an arbitrary timetable," particularly in terms of handing in assignments.35

<sup>33</sup> Belenky et al., 206.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> To determine why these women felt they needed to get high grades would require more research. It is possible that "good" grades are associated with being "good." A couple participants' struggles with being overachievers will be shared in the third division of this chapter.

35 Belenky et al., 211.

One of the participants in my study shared that it was meaningful to have a professor understand that students in the Phoenix long-distance learning program "were at a different level than people on campus." They had more life experiences, were holding full-time jobs, and "knew what it meant to get a paper in on time." Their level of commitment was different, and the professor treated them differently as a result, even naming them as "spiritually mature" in front of the students on the CST campus. Other adult educators likewise have found that midlife adults bring particular gifts to the graduate school classroom. Willment observes, "Typically, midlife adults have a deep sense of curiosity, are extremely motivated for study, and often go beyond what is expected of adults." 36

Participants' comments indicated that they preferred teachers who practiced an engaged, feminist pedagogy and connected styles of teaching. Referring to Carol Gilligan's work on women's ethical development, Robbin Crabtree, David Alan Sapp, and Adela Licona assert that "feminist teaching uses an ethic of care." Therefore,

Feminist teachers demonstrate sincere concern for their students as people and as learners and communicate this care through treating students as individuals, helping students make connections between their studies and their personal lives, and guiding students through the process of personal growth that accompanies their intellectual development. This process includes a special care for female students, inside and outside of the classroom.<sup>38</sup>

In describing her concept of "engaged pedagogy," bell hooks expresses some of the same ideas and expands upon them. Engaged teachers get to know their students because they

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Willment, 35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Robbin D. Crabtree, David Alan Sapp, and Adela C. Licona, "Introduction: The Passion and the Praxis of Feminist Pedagogy," in *Feminist Pedagogy: Looking Back to Move Forward*, ed. Robbin D. Crabtree, David Alan Sapp, and Adela C. Licona (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Crabtree, Sapp, and Licona, 4-5.

"believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students." Respect for students accompanies connected and engaged teaching. Flannery affirms that "women are agents in fostering their own self-esteem as well as in developing their own identities." Thus, "women at all levels of education" have been found to resist "demeaning approaches to education" and "being treated like children."

Caring and respect take many forms, including truly listening and responding helpfully. Altheia wrote, "I appreciate a teacher who listens to students' insights and is willing to help them think it through to a complete thought or idea." This is what "midwife-teachers" do: they draw out students' knowledge and "assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it." Similarly, one of my Korean participants was pleased when professors really tried to understand non-native English speakers' verbal contributions and engaged them around the thoughts they were seeking to express, for example, saying,

"Ok, I understand this much. But when you said this, I didn't get it. But, would you say something more?" Then, foreign student may develop the person's statement more. Then, the conversation can be more developing naturally, for abundance. And then, help foreign students think better.

Another Korean participant spoke of the importance of professors responding to Korean students' comments in an affirming and encouraging manner and not directly correcting

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 204, 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Daniele D. Flannery, "Identity and Self-Esteem," in *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning*, Elisabeth Hayes, Daniele D. Flannery, et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Flannery, "Identity and Self-Esteem," 68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Belenky et al., 217.

what they have said, because then they will not want to say anything in class. For people from Asian cultures, being corrected in the public sphere of the classroom is especially shameful, causing one to lose face.

Other forms of respect and care that were noted by participants included responding to emails, having "open doors" for office visits, and keeping appointments at the prearranged times. Participants appreciated professors who were really open to having students come and talk to them and ask them questions, who had "the ability to allow you to come into their space without feeling like it is a heavy posture." One woman felt that "real learning happens" in the personal interaction with professors who "open themselves to you" and are willing and able to share with students how they do their academic work and what it takes "to be a good scholar."

A professor's ability to create community and to manage classroom dynamics was a skill that was highly valued by participants in my study. Rachelle shared:

I have found that the worship professors and the preaching professors . . . have been really good at creating a sense of community in the classroom, where students are able to give real feedback, and that includes negative feedback, but in a way that can be heard and accepted. . . . I think that's a real gift to the students. Probably hard—I don't know quite how they do it, but they do.

It is important that teachers know how to invite students into conversation in ways that are welcoming and non-intimidating, especially if they are not from the dominant culture. The inclusion of voices from various backgrounds was meaningful to several of the women in my research group. A couple women shared that they appreciated it when professors had the tact "to help other people understand it's not their turn to talk without hurting their feelings" or met with excessive talkers outside of class and communicated to

them how they were affecting the class's dynamics. As an introvert, Jackie found it

helpful when a teacher says, "If you haven't spoken yet—let's hear from people who haven't said anything." . . . . Very helpful when the instructor makes a space for the introverts or the people who are still thinking about the question you asked five minutes ago and now are in another universe. I appreciate that a lot.

When there were both master's and doctoral level students in a class, participants were grateful for professors who could keep the conversation on a level and in linguistic terms (for example, English, as opposed to Greek or Hebrew) that all the students could connect with and understand, while addressing the academic needs of the different types of students.

Additionally helpful to creating a positive classroom environment was when professors shared something of themselves and their lives with their students—"you feel just a little more homey or something." Knowing who a professor is, that she or he is a "good human being," elicits trust in students. Palmer asserts, "Good teaching comes from good people." Engaged pedagogy or holistic education means that teachers grow and are empowered as well as students. For this to happen, teachers need to be vulnerable and take the risks they ask of their students, including sharing personal narratives. Selfsharing on the part of educators can tear down the construct that they are all-knowing and diminish hierarchical relations of power while opening up another level of learning. Through sharing, professors are able to link their "confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material." Students are allowed to see how "experts" in their fields have

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Palmer, 13.

<sup>44</sup> hooks, 21.

<sup>45</sup> hooks, 21.

lived their lives and worked through issues of ministry and personal growth and thus learn vicariously from those experiences. In addition, as Jane observed, professors who are down to earth, make "jokes," and are "even irreverent at times" can help learners "look at things a different way, and to feel normal about our ignorance." Participants in my study appreciated professors who shared how they had applied their knowledge in ministerial contexts and who taught their students to do the same. These professors were midwife-teachers in that they encouraged "students to use their knowledge in everyday life."

First-year students in particular felt that professors needed to be more realistic in their expectations of what students could do and more reasonable in their assigned workloads. Some professors needed to recognize that their introductory survey courses were not the only ones students were taking; they needed to "prioritize within their subject what really should be take-aways," rather than trying to cover everything. Thus, gratitude was expressed for a professor who "was very clear about what she expected, what she wanted us to do. And then she set it up as best she could for us to succeed." Participants also appreciated teachers who were good at giving a range of assignments or providing opportunities for "alternative assignments—ways we as students can be creative and explore the other side of our brain and interact with classmates as well as the professor and the material." It was important to participants that teachers actually returned assignments, wrote "thoughtful responses to papers," and put grades on assignments if grades were a part of the class. A couple women said that they liked it when teachers distinguished between required and suggested readings,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Belenky et al., 219.

Because if there is a topic that I am really hot on, I can go back and look at it some point in time or I can read it then. But if it's not required, I don't have to spend oodles of days on it knowing that this is some left-turn author that doesn't benefit the course.

Only one participant said that she found it helpful to be challenged by her teachers. Rachelle wrote, "I appreciate professors that challenge me, asking for more than may be comfortable." In addition, she said, "I appreciate professors that hold the class to a high standard of behavior and academic achievement." Other participants, however, found it more helpful when professors were able to gently and sensitively guide students in facing the challenges and discomforts of their courses. A few female professors were mentioned as having adeptly led students to open up and "think of something different" and to hear and consider various perspectives (from other students and scholars) in relation to their own lives and thinking.

# Challenging, Helpful, and Meaningful Courses

What teachers do and who they are in the classroom can make a difference in how students experience and evaluate their courses. This was evident in many of the responses to my questions, "What kinds of courses are challenging? Helpful? Meaningful?" One woman pointed out that "the few [classes] that I have not felt helpful involved teaching experiences. Classmates who have had the same required class with different teachers had different experiences." Students' background knowledge, life experiences, vocational goals, and expectations for a particular course also affect how they approach and experience that course. These factors need to be taken into consideration when looking at what participants said about courses they found meaningful, helpful, and challenging.

Nonetheless, the subject matter of a course can present its own challenges and be

meaningful and helpful in itself.

Several of my research participants stated that all or most of the classes they had taken at CST and ETSC had been meaningful, although maybe "meaningful in different ways." For Suzanne, "Courses that deal with alternative ways of experiencing religion and of discussing God are very meaningful." Similarly, an African American woman had found it helpful to have readings that represented a diversity of perspectives and contexts, such as African, Asian, and feminist. Such readings challenged her "to learn about my own context, too." The challenges of being stretched and of learning to think and perceive in new ways were likewise meaningful. Natalie expressed this when she wrote, "All the classes have been challenging in the sense that they have raised new questions for me as well as providing answers." As Momma G encountered various perspectives, she felt challenged, yet enlightened:

Every time we were in a class, it was as though something I had seen from the outside was unfolding, and I was able to see more and more layers of it. I just loved that, because I was exposed to so much stuff and how one person's view of what I thought was so cut and dried was so different from what my view was. And so I just learned how people look at things differently and understand them differently. That's been phenomenal. It's been very challenging, because I don't think that way. But, the stuff is just, I just think, How do people think these things? I don't think like that. That's been really cool.

Many of the participants shared that their theology, ethics, and history courses were difficult and challenging, yet many of them also said that these classes had been meaningful, interesting, and helpful. Two reasons were frequently given for why these courses were challenging: they involved learning a new language and a new way of thinking, and they commonly required an extensive amount of reading, writing, and reflecting. Introductory Christian theology courses were especially difficult for those who

were unfamiliar with Protestant theological concepts, but the theological vocabulary was new to most as well. Several women talked about reading a text several times in order to understand it, and even then, they might still not "get it." A Korean student pointed out that the English for process theology "was much more difficult" than the English for any other subject; she knew the words, but she could not "make sense of it." Ethics courses in particular required "a different way of thinking" that was hard for some midlife women. As Nancy said,

It takes a certain kind of analytical thinking. It relies on information from philosophers and ethicists who have preceded me, who I don't know who they are. Then there's also a new vocabulary on top of it. . . . What words you thought you knew don't quite mean that.

Struggling with academic reading assignments is not unique to midlife seminary students, however. Writing about her entry into a master's degree program in education thirty years after completing an undergraduate degree, Susanna Burns shares, "I found myself spending a great deal of time mastering the course readings. I was so unaccustomed to academic writing that I had to read and reread articles to make sense of the terminology and understand the concepts."<sup>47</sup>

For a couple women in my study, theology and philosophy involved thinking that was too theoretical and abstract. One of them shared that she was not a "deep" or "conceptual thinker," "so the theology and philosophy stuff just is over my head." Besides, "You've been arguing about it for millennia, so why are we still arguing about it? It's not gonna solve anything." The other woman expressed similar sentiments:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Susanna Burns, "The Meandering Graduate Journey of an Adult Educator," in *Learners in Midlife: Graduate Education and Workplaces in Canada*, ed. Jo-Anne H. Willment (NW Calgary, Alberta: Detselig Enterprises, 2008), 95.

I have a practical approach to life or something, that that theology is still so much thinking.... There's a part of you that wants to always say, 'This is all great. How does this help us?.... How do I do better because of *this*?'

So, for the former participant, "Practical classes were great!" The latter participant went on to say, "I think that I progressed in it so that I see the practical application. But for me it is, what I'm doing at school is *hugely* practical. . . . Something real that I want to put out in the world."

The workloads for seminary courses, particularly introductory theology, Christian history, and ethics courses, were commented upon by many participants. One seventh-semester student shared,

And as much as I love to read, I feel like I get more out of being in the class than I do in the reading, because so much of the time I have to skim the material or I don't have time to read a certain chapter.

Other participants lamented not having the time to process information, to reflect on it and assimilate it:

It feels like there's so much information, we're not getting good at anything. I'm not getting good at anything. I mean, somebody says, 'Oh, yeah, they mentioned that last semester.' And I'm thinking, *They did?* . . . [S]o how do you get good at anything if it just feels like you're in a haze?

I think that Christian history class, to try and teach the history of Christianity in fourteen weeks—2000 years' worth of history—is impractical. . . . I felt kind of gypped, in that, although I found the class really hard, I wanted to learn all this stuff—I just wanted like, some time to process it.

I think I have a lot of knowledge and a lot of input from outside for three years, but I really needed some time to digest. Not enough time to digest.

A second-semester student offered a vivid metaphor for the experience of having too much to read and process and too little time to do it in: "Just trying to cram too much in the toilet. Too much paper. If I had had it at a different pace or with lesser materials, one

of the two, just to bring it back to some norm," it would have been better. Cognitive neuroscientist James Zull observes,

All this assembly and association of bits of data, memories, and images might be considered the slowest part of learning. It takes time and involves rerunning our data over and over. It takes reflection. Such reflection is often missing in classrooms where 'coverage' is the primary goal.<sup>48</sup>

Professors of introductory survey courses are commonly guilty of trying to cover too much material in too little time, which does not leave much space for deep reflection and construction of meaning. In addition, as Strauch notes in her book on the middle-aged brain, when older brains are confronted with new information, it takes them longer to process and assimilate it.<sup>49</sup> One participant, however, found some benefit to having to do "a lot of reading and writing," such as reading an entire book and writing a reflection paper each week for one class: "This level of rigor is good for me, but also quite exhausting."

Despite the challenges of theology courses, many participants found them to be beneficial. Although Jane struggled to read, comprehend, and write about five or six "completely different theological viewpoints" each week, when she was able to realize what made sense and worked for her, versus what "I didn't feel was correct for me," it was meaningful. Similarly, Rachelle observed that the complexity of the theology courses was challenging, but, "I have really appreciated learning about different theologies and having to think about theology, something I hadn't been asked to do before. I am a process person and I appreciate having language to explain my theology." The Unitarian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> James E. Zull, "Key Aspects of How the Brain Learns," in *The Neuroscience of Adult Learning*, ed. Sandra Johnson and Kathleen Taylor, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 110 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Strauch, 47.

Universalist (UU) participant, however, found it challenging to connect with the content of her Christian theology course—"I just didn't get it." She had trouble understanding how people could believe in such outdated concepts or why they were meaningful. Thus, in that course as well as others, "the most challenging thing" had been figuring out where she stood in relation to Christian thought. In sum, theology courses provided opportunities for many students "to think about what and why I believe" and gave them language to express this.

The Bible is central for many Christians' faith and practice; it is the primary source for preaching and the subject matter for many Christian education classes.

Probably for that reason, many of my research participants came to seminary desiring and expecting to gain extensive knowledge about the Bible. Not surprisingly, then, courses in Hebrew Bible and New Testament were frequently named as among the most helpful and meaningful courses. Indeed, in some cases, a thirst for biblical knowledge led participants to name Bible classes as helpful or meaningful despite shortcomings in professors' teaching styles and approaches to their courses:

I liked that class a lot, and she was so interesting, but she's very disorganized . . So I didn't feel like I came out of that class with a big picture understanding of the text. I mean, it was interesting every day—she's really interesting—but it was just all over the map, there was no like, train of thought.

Even though we bitch about [the professor], his class—it's fascinating, what he does. . . . It's like, yeah, this is kind of cool and interesting, but do I really need to know this? But anyhow, it is interesting, and all of it sheds new light on my thinking.

Rachelle found her "biblical classes to be rigorous academic classes with high standards. I appreciate being stretched a bit in these classes." Other participants were

grateful that they were able to learn how to use the tools of biblical criticism to interpret texts. Natalie shared that "the biblical courses and Greek classes have enabled me to preach and lead small groups with greater confidence." Another woman noted that it was helpful to have a biblical studies professor point out the difference between fact and faith before beginning to analyze texts from a historical-critical perspective. Meanwhile, the UU participant "loved" her Bible courses as they were.

Many of the participants shared their appreciation for and enjoyment of their practical theology courses, including preaching, pastoral/spiritual care and counseling, worship, and religious education. Natalie expressed one of the major reasons why these courses are so significant: "'Practical' courses have enabled me to reflect on church life and implement what I'm learning straight away." In addition, as Momma G stated, "You get to think what you think and then do it, and see how it works and evaluate it from there. I really like that." One person planning to become a chaplain said that her spiritual care classes "have been awesome," adding, "because that's what I want to do and that's what I am interested in." Similarly, another woman headed toward chaplaincy liked her practical theology course the most, even though it was also the most challenging and she could not "seem to get an A" in the course. CJ enjoyed classes that combined reading and preparation with contextual learning experiences, such as visiting the U.S.-Mexican border and attending the UMC's General Conference. The "internship options were good," according to Jackie, and she appreciated having a field education seminar group that consisted of older students who had worked in ministry,

so that when we went to our internships and came back once a week to talk about it, we weren't starting from scratch. We weren't 24-year-olds who had never been

in the church before and had different issues. We had our own issues, but they were our own. That was really useful.

Spiritual formation courses were popular with several students, both because they were personally beneficial and because they provided students with resources to use in their churches. The required Vocational Discernment course was mentioned as helpful by a couple women. One shared that it created a space for "going in and figuring out what's really happening with you internally," and it helped her clarify her call. Another participant said that the Spiritual Development class "really changed my life." After that class, she had taken more spiritual formation classes and had found them meaningful and empowering. She observed, "It's what I had been looking for, and I feel like they are talking in my language, like, I can get it." She could pull in, apply, and integrate her knowledge of psychology with what she was learning in these classes. Another participant found that her spirituality class helped her become aware of and deal with the anger she was carrying with her. The evening sessions that involved learning a contemplative prayer practice, trying it, discussing it, and then practicing it again within the context of a short worship service was "very helpful" to Jackie. It was "one credit on a Thursday night of total renewal opportunity. . . . it was like a little retreat. Beautifully done, beautifully decorated service every time. Good for my spirit." The spiritual formation classes helped several participants develop "useful spiritual disciplines," and some of them had or were planning to teach what they had learned to members of their religious communities.

Classes with liberative and justice-oriented components were significant to two of the Korean women. One of them appreciated the focus on feminist approaches to her

courses' subject matter, for example, studying the women in Genesis and feminist pedagogy. Another Korean participant enjoyed her Church and Social Systems class, although she found it "very challenging" and demanding. She learned a lot about post-colonialism and began considering her own country a post-colonialist country: "I never thought about that before then." The class also challenged her to contemplate the role of Christianity in relation to systems of power and colonialism.

### Assignments and Grades

The pressures of trying to complete assignments and meet expectations for desired grades can cast shadows on what would otherwise be enjoyable classes for students. I asked participants in my study, "What kinds of assignments do you prefer?" I often received much more than simple statements about assignment preferences, and responses to other interview questions also elicited thoughts about course assignments. I heard reflections on approaches to grading and on trying to read, write, and take tests as midlife women. Some of these reflections will be included in this section. In considering the participants' assignment preferences, I would note that if women had never experienced a particular type of assignment, they might not have even considered it as a possibility. Ray pointed this out when she said, "I haven't had any group assignments, so I can't speak to that."

In response to my question about assignment preferences, a couple interviewees were honest and probably spoke for many of the other participants. Jackie said bluntly, "None," while Vicky hedged a little, replying, "Only thing I can say is really silly answer—I don't like assignments." Vicky continued and said, "I'm kind of, just reading

person. So, just reading is fine. Reading and thinking." One other participant named reading among her preferred types of assignments and a few shared that they enjoyed "the reading"—there was just too much of it for full-time students and no helpful instruction in how to read and comprehend a lot of material in a short amount of time. Thus, one woman mentioned "reading with a purpose" as a preferred assignment. In addition, Dena liked having reading assignments broken down for her week by week, rather than being told to "read the book in the next six weeks."

Beyond reading assignments, Jackie acknowledged, "I don't know how you get around asking people to write," but she was "ok with that." However, it would have been nice if she could have occasionally submitted "creative writing, instead of Chicago Style of writing," for example, a poem or a prayer in place of an academic paper. Also recognizing the importance of writing, Vicky admitted that "writing is a really good assignment"; through writing, she can see how she is thinking, process her thoughts and see their effects, and organize her thinking in a more logical manner. Similarly, Jane noted, "I guess asking us to write these papers is the best way we could learn it." Indeed, cognitive neuroscience suggests that the physical act of writing serves the learning process. According to Zull, "writing ideas down and talking about them" are "forms of active testing," and actively "testing our theories is the ultimate step in learning." Without such testing, theory is not concretized and learning is not completed.

Several women said that they liked to write; Suzanne preferred writing because, "I am most comfortable sharing through the written word." Beth considered herself a good writer and preferred writing assignments, but she did not actually like writing.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Zull, 7.

Nonetheless, she had "been challenged to stretch my own sense of the divine through my readings and my paper writing." Martha liked to write and considered herself "a pretty good writer," but she was finding it difficult to do: "It's hard for me to sit down and say, 'I'm going to write this paper, and I'm just going to get something down on paper,' and get started." Pauline also wrestled with writing papers, especially the more academic ones. She remembered that "it used to be real easy" for her to write papers when she was an undergraduate student as a young adult, but as a graduate student in her fifties, "Writing papers has been just tedious. It has been so difficult for me." Like the other participants I have mentioned, though, she recognized the value in writing—"it pushes me in a way I will not push myself'—and she preferred papers to tests.

Some of these women's difficulties with writing may be attributed to the middleaged brain. When midlife adults are able to make even small connections with what they already know, their brains work quickly to discern patterns and underlying themes, grasp the big picture, and arrive at logical conclusions. 51 Having made these connections through intuitive and holistic processes, midlife women find it a time-consuming struggle to ferret out reasons for their conclusions and put down their thinking processes in a linear, step-by-step format. Adding to their difficulties, middle-aged people find it more difficult to focus on the task at hand and central ideas, because their brains do not block out irrelevant material as well as they once did.<sup>52</sup>

For Ray, the struggle with paper writing was connected with style and complexity. In the corporate world, she had been required to write memos at a fourth-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Strauch, 48-49. <sup>52</sup> Strauch, 79, 88.

grade reading level. Brevity, conciseness, and simple vocabulary were desired. She was not used to stating ideas and then developing them, so, "I think my first semester I felt like an illiterate idiot that couldn't either read or write." Although she had learned to write for graduate school, she still preferred short papers: "Longer papers are grueling to me because I'm a procrastinator, and after I look at it so long, I can't see it." Much like Martha, Pauline, and Ray, Burns struggled with writing for graduate school:

Twenty-five pages seemed monumental. I had not written anything longer than 2-3 pages in recent memory and I was sure that I could not find that much to say. I had no idea where to begin or what topic to select. I did not know how to write an academic paper at the master's level or how to organize my thoughts. I was all over the place. I just wrote and wrote. The rules of plagiarism were unclear to me and I did not remember how to cite references or to include direct quotes. I was overwhelmed.<sup>53</sup>

As with Ray, Julie preferred writing shorter papers throughout the semester, including "weekly reflections," rather than long papers. However, Anne felt that one-page weekly reflection papers were too short a requirement: "What can you write in one page? I'm writing it to get it written, read stuff. There is no meaning at all for me in that reflection piece." Instead, she enjoyed doing research and being able to "put ideas together," integrating various fields of thought and making connections among them.

Dena also enjoyed "writing integrative papers." She shared, "Some of the longer papers have been very satisfying for me. In my opinion, I have not had to do enough biblical analysis." In addition, she observed, "There has been a surprisingly low amount of journaling or personal reflection required. That might have been helpful." Similarly, Momma G enjoyed topical research and biblical exegesis; nonetheless, she appreciated

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Burns, 95.

having to write "reflections on required readings" because it kept her "on track with reading."

Most of the participants preferred writing papers to taking tests, usually because tests required memorizing information. A few women said they were never very good with memorizing data (especially names and numbers), while others found they could not do it as easily as they once did. Nancy reflected,

It takes longer for me to remember things; I've never had a great memory anyhow. So, for something to stick in my head, it just takes longer. And then to hold something in my head... sometimes I just can't do it anymore.

Jane shared that she was "a memory master" in high school, but as a midlife student, "I just cannot memorize anymore. And that's another thing. I can sit with it for hours and hours and hours, and it gets to the point where I give up, because nothing's sticking. So that's a frustration." The slower learning speed of the midlife brain, especially one over 50, may have had something to do with these women's memorization difficulties. 54 Other factors, such as stress, depression, lack of physical activity, certain medications, and poor nutrition can inhibit the process of encoding and transferring information to long-term memory. Focus and attention play a role in memorizing as well. Lifespan psychologist K. C. Kirasic observes that "failures in attention due to distraction or fatigue will have a negative impact on information encoded or retrieved." In addition, increased incidence rates of "retrieval blocks" and "failures in name finding" are "early signs of cognitive

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Kirasic, 98.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Kirasic, 96.

aging [that] may be manifested in midlife."56

A couple participants observed that writing papers was more beneficial than taking tests because papers give one "the opportunity to synthesize, to bring it all together," whereas, when one memorizes something for an exam, it is quickly "lost." In addition, when you write "from what you think," it is more meaningful and tends to stay with you longer. Pauline expressed this thought along with her sense that "test-taking, even at the graduate level, it feels too much like I am pleasing somebody else."

On a slightly different note, Rachelle disliked "take-home tests because there is always the uncertainty of how much time and attention is enough. Exams during a set time period are easier because they have a specific focus and time and then they are over." However, she preferred academic papers, which were "almost second nature" for her, and she could "control the topic and the scope and [was] usually given guidance as to how much is expected." Similarly, Martha felt that tests were "in some ways" easier, because they seemed "more finite. You just have to learn this body of information and then put it down on paper. That seems like it has an end, where papers seem so big sometimes." The only other participant who preferred tests was a Korean woman who explained that, since "I'm not used to" writing papers, tests were "much easier." She admitted that memorizing had become more difficult with age, but, in contrast to the participants mentioned earlier, her experience was, "If I take a test, it memorizes my head. But if I write something in my paper, all the information just gone away." She wished she would have had to memorize the factual information in her Christian history

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Christopher Hertzog and Roger A. Dixon, "Metacognition in Midlife," in *Middle Adulthood: A Lifespan Perspective*, ed. Sherry L. Willis and Mike Martin (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 358.

class for a test, so she would continue to have it in her head and could share that important information with others.

Several women mentioned that they enjoyed assignments involving practical applications, such as designing educational events, preaching, or planning and conducting worship services. Dena found it helpful when she was asked to analyze her own church setting and personal background. She also liked engaging in discussions. On the same note, Kathleen thought that "some working with groups" was good preparation for professional ministry, while Nancy preferred "projects where I can relate with people." A few participants had experienced and enjoyed being given the opportunity to be creative and to choose what they wanted to do for an assignment, whether it was creating a video, painting a mural, writing a musical, acting out a drama, or writing a poem. However, as Devorah reflected, "It's harder to be creative when all your other classes are like, write a paper, read this and reflect on it. But to be able to go outside the box, color outside the lines, is kind of cool." Creative and practical application assignments go beyond gathering data, which just engages the sensory area of the brain's neocortex, to reflection, creation, and testing or active experimentation, which engage the other three major areas of the neocortex (back-integrative, front-integrative, and motor).<sup>57</sup> According to Zull. "The more regions of the cortex used, the more change will occur," and the more powerful and long-lasting learning will be. 58

Nancy observed that having a variety of assignments and more than two per course was beneficial because one "had different opportunities to do well in the class."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Zull, 5. <sup>58</sup> Zull, 5.

Ray thought that for papers, "there should be two grades: one for content and one for grammar." A couple women shared that they did not like being graded on participation.

Jane said, "We have a class right now that every time someone speaks, the TA [teaching assistant] is marking it, making a checkmark. It forces me to say something when I'm not ready." As far as she was concerned, "If you're not actively falling asleep, you're participating." Speaking from her experience of being a shy introvert and growing up scared of her teachers, Devorah felt,

It makes for a very taxing environment where the professors or the teachers are like, . . . twenty percent of your grade is on how much you speak out in class. That's a very frightening place to be, when you don't want to or don't know how to speak out in class.

A few women brought up issues with professors not being clear about what was expected for assignments or tests, changing their expressed expectations, and having unclear and unrealistic guidelines for their grading. Part of the issue in some cases, as the women noted, was that professors were being required to do things differently than they had in the past, that is, they were being told that they had to write student learning objectives and then grade according to those. Nonetheless, students value professors who are clear and specific about what is expected and how students will be evaluated.

### Voice in the Classroom

Since the publications of *In a Different Voice* (1982) and *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986), the notion of voice has been a common theme in literature about women's learning, development, and education. Hayes suggests that this theme of women's voice is based in the pervasive understanding that women orient themselves more in terms of connection and relatedness than autonomy and separation (as men do),

and voice implies communicating and connecting with other people.<sup>59</sup> In addition, "voice" is "active, implying the ability to express thoughts and feelings so that they can be heard and understood by others."60 In mixed groups of females and males, girls and women have commonly not been heard or have felt that they did not have a voice worth hearing. Research in the 1970s and '80s found that, at the postsecondary level, women, in general, were rarely called on, and when female students did make verbal contributions, their comments were "more likely to be interrupted" and less likely to be expounded on or referred back to. 61 Aware of research pointing to men's dominance of classroom discussions. 62 I sought to learn about contemporary midlife women's experiences of having voice in their classes. I asked participants in my study, "Do you find it easy to speak up and share your views in classes? When you do speak up, do you feel like your voice is heard? Is your perspective honored? If not, please share a story or examples." I would note that the women's responses to these questions only provided their perspectives on their classroom participation and how it was received. Observations of them in their classes would have provided a fuller picture of how much they talked in class, what they said, and how their comments were received.

Participants' comfort levels with speaking up in class varied based on personality and context. However, when they did talk in class, generally these women felt that their contributions were heard, honored, and valued. Several of the participants thought they

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Hayes, "Voice," 79-80.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Hayes, "Voice," 80.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Myra Sadker and David Sadker, "Confronting Sexism in the College Classroom," in *Gender in the Classroom: Power and Pedagogy*, ed. Susan L. Gabriel and Isaiah Smithson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 177.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> See Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 75; Kegan, 213-14.

leaned toward talking too much in class. When I asked Jane, "Have you felt like you've been able to participate freely in classroom discussions?" she responded, "I have. I'm one of those four," referring back to her comment that there seemed to be only four people who talked in whole-class discussions. She laughed and said, "No, I'm not, but . . ." Jackie's concern over her talkativeness had led her to ask several of her professors if she was one of the people who dominated discussions. They eased her conscience, telling her, "No, you raise your hand and you wait,' that kind of thing." Thus, she was able to say, "I think I self-monitor pretty well." A couple other women were more harsh in talking about themselves. One responded to my question about whether she found it easy to speak up and share her views as follows: "Oh, heavens, yes. I'm a blabbermouth. I've been getting in trouble for my mouth since I was in first grade." The second said that she had to check "myself a little bit, 'cause I know that I can be dominating." A third woman, although she wondered "if sometimes I have talked too much," thought that she played a beneficial role in a particular ethics class, because, "I'd be willing to guess an answer and be wrong." It was safe in that class, with that professor, to give an incorrect answer. Plus, "When you're wrong at school, at least it's a talking point."

In her essay on voice, Hayes cites dissertation research by Tanya Furst (1991) and Diane Horwitz (1994) in which non-traditional women students "stated that they talked more than other students, and even that professors relied on them to keep class discussions going." Hayes suggests two reasons for this self-perceived talkativeness: (1) Norms of silence for women in public settings and stereotypes of women as "talkative" cause women to perceive themselves as "taking up more talk time than they actually are";

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Hayes, "Voice," 87.

and (2) older "women's range of life experiences and motivation to learn was what made the difference in their amount of talk." While the latter reason has support from my research, the former does not, although it may still be true. My participants' comments about classroom participation and discussions suggest they had a relational concern for giving everyone an opportunity to be heard and to have a voice. They did not want to be one of those persons who takes up a lot of class time with his or her talk. In addition, many of the women wanted to hear others' thoughts and ideas so they could learn from them. For Pauline, it was one of her educational and spiritual goals to work on really listening to other people and what they were trying to share, so, as a student, she practiced resisting the temptation "to want to jump in" and only spoke when "I really have something to say."

A few women directly or indirectly suggested that their comfort with speaking up in class was related to their personalities. The woman who was willing to be "wrong," added that she did not "mind looking stupid. And I don't know why. I think probably because most of the time I don't look stupid, and so I'm willing to risk." Plus, she came from a career in which she had power and was accustomed to speaking in rooms where people listened to her. Offering more evidence of her strong personality, she said, "I think it would have been fine to have [had my perspective] challenged more often," because it might have made her thinking "sharper." Another woman responded to my asking if she felt comfortable speaking up in class with, "Yes, but that's because of me. I'm gonna say what I think. And I don't necessarily feel bad if you don't agree with me." Similarly, a third participant said she talked a lot in classes, because "that's my temperament."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Hayes, "Voice," 87.

However, she would then go home and rehash what she had said, often regretting some of her outspokenness.

Conversely, personality can make one more reticent. For one introvert,

Before I express anything, I need to think about it. I need to process it in my mind. I need to evaluate if this is a place where I can share this story or this experience or make this comment or even ask this question.

Since it had "taken a lot" for this person to come to a point where she felt comfortable opening her "mouth in a classroom," she felt hurt when one professor suggested she was "talking too much in class." It was a class in which

I was one of the older students in the class. I have had experiences that are beyond what a lot of the students in the class have had and I felt that, . . . I've already experienced this or I've already dealt with stuff like this, and I just felt my experiences were not honored.

This person had earlier observed that the ease with which she spoke up and shared her perspective in class depended

on the size of the class and the comfort level, the safety that the professor has established in the class from the very beginning, and how well I know the other students, and how comfortable I feel with the material. If it's something that's my own personal belief or opinion, and something that I feel very strongly about, then it's easier. If it's something that I'm not really that familiar with, then I kind of tend to hang back and listen to what other people are saying.

As this woman indicated, it is not personality alone that determines comfort level with speaking up in class. Class size, past educational experiences, developmental locations, cultural norms and backgrounds, and psychological safety in the learning environment all influence how much and in what ways individuals will participate in classroom discussions.

One other person noted that physical space and class size can have a significant

impact on student talk in the classroom. This woman had attended her first-year introductory courses in the theater space on campus: "Once we got out of Mudd, it was much better. Because it's hard to be engaged and interactive in that big lecture hall." The reason the classes were meeting in Mudd Theater was because it was the only space that would hold the large number of students who were enrolled in them that year. A few participants mentioned that familiarity with the vocabulary and the content of the subject under discussion also made a difference in whether they talked in their classes. Not everyone was willing to take the risk of looking "stupid." One woman shared,

Sometimes I think the vocabulary scares me here a little bit, so I don't say a whole lot until I get really comfortable. Like with ethics or systematic theology, I was really afraid to say some of the words because they were unfamiliar; they were new terms, and they had different meanings, like "deontological."

The climate and tone created by the professor and one's comfort level with other students are additional factors influencing students' classroom participation. Several participants mentioned the role of professors' leadership in determining whether they voiced their views and asked questions in class. They shared that professors created psychologically safe learning environments when they were open to different perspectives, welcomed questions and comments, and responded encouragingly and supportively to students' statements. Educational consultant Pat Wolfe writes, "Being psychologically safe means feeling free enough to take risks. Learners cannot make connections if they have been or will be shamed or made to feel stupid for giving a wrong answer or not responding quickly enough." Thus, when professors care about their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Pat Wolfe, "The Role of Meaning and Emotion in Learning," in *The Neuroscience of Adult Learning*, ed. Sandra Johnson and Kathleen Taylor, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 110 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 40.

students and build trust, students are more likely to feel that they can express their thoughts and ideas, even ones that have not been fully formed yet. One participant in my study shared that it was important to her to find out "how the professor handles contrary opinions." She did not want to be criticized or attacked by the professor, because, "I feel like I'm here to learn; I'm not here to challenge anyone with their philosophy or their theory or what have you." On a similar note, Beth observed that she was reluctant to speak up in a class where the professor was "blunt" with students, but when professors listened to people and were open and responsive, she did not hesitate to share. Two of the Korean participants commented on how they appreciated it when professors really listened to what Korean students had to say and discussed or built on their comments, rather than quickly going on to another student or talking about something else. This helped the women feel they had something valuable to contribute and that the professor cared enough to try to understand what they were saying.

Classmates as well as professors can affect how comfortable midlife women feel with sharing in class. One woman noted, "There are some people that have come here from schools of religious study, and they're so well versed in this that it can be intimidating, not only as a student but as an older student. Like maybe I missed some books." Students with prior knowledge in a subject are likely to speak up more freely in class and even dominate discussions, making it difficult for others to share. Two other participants commented on the talkativeness and confidence level of American students in general. Pauline reflected, "One of the things that has surprised me the most here is the students. I just don't find that many shy students. . . . I find them very interactive, very

participatory. That's been kind of shocking for me." A Korean woman felt intimidated by "this white dominant culture," because "they are confident, and they are loud, and they talk all the time. They are bonding [with] each other." Not only did she think that she did not speak English well enough to fully participate in class discussions, she felt that the dominant culture students "are not very open or very kind enough to make relationships with Koreans. . . . It's really divided, like, American and non-native American." However, it was male Korean students who sometimes made her feel like her perspective was not valued, particularly when she spoke on behalf of their wives. Another Korean participant felt like the Korean students in a class turned on her when, based on her own experience, she disagreed with what a Korean Ph.D. student said about Korean people and culture. She explained, "Doctorate degree [students] always have to prove how smart they are in front of the professors. So they want to kind of crush me down." A liberal lesbian participant shared that in whole class or large group situations, she had often felt others respond to her in a retaliatory way with questions like, "Well, what do you mean?' or, 'How can you say that?'" She recognized it as a "personal defense mechanism" based "on where they are in their own personal journeys," but this did not lessen the impact of the animosity that was expressed. Yet, she had found that the development of relationships through small group discussions made it more likely that people would accept one another and their diverse perspectives.

Cultural differences and struggles with language made it difficult for the Korean participants to share verbally in class. Since English was not their first language, when they talked, they had to think about grammar as well as content, and sometimes the

content was lost as they tried to find the right words and sentence structures to express themselves. One Korean participant said she "always hesitated," when it came to speaking in class, because she was concerned about whether she would be understood or not: "In many cases, I felt that what I said was not fully understood by other classmates because of my language deficiency." If she had been more fluent, "then I think I can raise up my voice more often, but I didn't." In addition, the Korean students were not familiar with the discussion approach, and "it's really hard to raise our hands, because it's not our culture." They needed to be invited to share in a way that did not put them on the spot.

In light of these educational cultural differences, one of the Korean participants noted that she found Eric Law's practice of "mutual invitation" helpful. 66 Another woman of color also expressed her appreciation for this methodology, because it is a way to balance the amount of talk so that a few people do not "consume conversations." The process begins with one person sharing and then inviting another person to speak. The second person has the option of talking or passing, but she or he has to then invite a third person to share, and so on. For several years, Law's book, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*, was suggested reading for new students at CST before they attended orientation. One white woman told me about her experience with the book: "When I first read it, when I started, I thought, 'I really hate this book. This is not me, and I'm not like that, this sort of overbearing, white privileged person." But she determined to finish the book and get what she could from it. Then, on the first day of one of her first classes, she found herself in a small group with two Korean women,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Eric H. F. Law, The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993), 82-88.

And they never said a word, and I went, 'Oh, my God.' I just made a suggestion among other people in the class. I said, 'Why don't we try that mutual invitation method instead of talking whenever we feel like it? Let's see if we can give everyone a voice.'

Based on what several of my research participants shared, many midlife women like to hear different voices in the classroom. For example, Jackie commented that she found it "very helpful when people of faith traditions other than my own speak up."

However, in addition to what has been shared in this section, experiences with prejudice or bias in the classroom can keep some people silent.

### Prejudice and Bias

In order to ascertain the extent to which women in my study may or may not have felt mistreated as female midlife seminary students, I asked them, "Have you experienced ageism, sexism, or other prejudices at CST?" It seemed that most of the women I interviewed had to take a few moments to consider whether they had had any such experiences. Only a few mentioned experiences of bias against them based on their age and or gender. Jane initially responded to my question by mentioning that she thought "the kids don't know how to relate to us," referring to the students in their twenties. She felt like there was too much of an age gap for them to really connect with one another. When I asked her if she had felt any other kind of prejudices, she replied, "No, not at all. Other than the tests—no, that's not prejudice. How dare you give us a test when we're past 50! [Laughter.] It's a plot, I tell you." For Martha, the age difference with younger students was easily overcome:

It's just been amazing to me that the young people have welcomed me in, included me. Maybe at first there was some sense of like, well, this isn't someone who's part of our group. But those barriers seemed to come down really quickly.

The classes are organized so there's small group time or other ways to really get to know people.

Once the barriers were lowered or the "initial connection" was made, age differences were not important in the classroom. A participant in her late fifties commented, "There's some kind of expectation that an older person will feel like this or think like this because they're older. But in general, I think the students here are very interactive with different generations and are fine about it." Another late-fifties student shared that it had been comforting to discover she was not the oldest student on campus. She also noted that her professors had not treated her as "old."

However, one woman had an experience of being overlooked by a male teaching assistant (TA), and she felt it was because of her age. The class had been divided into small groups, and the TA

was going around the room saying everyone's names and he just skipped me. He did not even see me. . . . I don't think there was anything intentional at all. I just think it was, I don't think I was on his radar. The young, pretty 25-year-old was on his radar, but I was invisible to him.

That invisibility made her feel "like I was back in first grade" in the 1960s, when girls "were taught to be quiet, to raise our hands if we wanted to speak, and to keep our knees closed so our panties wouldn't show." Yet she and the other "moms"—"they called us that, 'the moms,"—were able to laugh about the incident once it had been framed in terms of an older woman not being on the young TA's "radar." They also teased the TA "about it like crazy." Conversely, a participant in her thirties had felt belittled in a small group situation by a female student older than she. This other woman responded to something that the participant said in a way that "really made me feel undervalued," like

she did not have anything of worth to bring to the group. Among Episcopalian students, many of whom were in their fifties and sixties, this young midlife participant frequently felt marginalized or patronized due to her age.

The experience of feeling patronized was not limited to younger students in my research group, though. A woman in her fifties expressed her sense of being treated condescendingly as follows:

This is probably simply a perception, but I will venture to say that in the administrative arena there has been some ageism. The entire time I have been attending CST, there has been the sense that we as students are being treated like children (i.e., emails about attending financial aid workshops that come off as threatening—"if you don't come to this, you won't get your financial aid, so come or else.") . . . As adults who have been in the work world for some time, we don't really need to be told that if we borrow money we have to pay it back.

Yet she and other people who, like her, were midlife commuter students recognized that the financial aid workshops were required and were willing to attend them. A connected issue arose with trying to get financial aid workshops scheduled for a time or place that would accommodate their situation: "While we did get it worked out, the experience was frustrating." Another participant who commuted to school named this institutional bias "commuterism." Since the majority of midlife seminarians are commuting more than thirty minutes to school, institutional structures and practices that are designed for young adults living on or close to campus are biased against these midlife adults whose lives are centered in other geographical locations.

A couple of the women in my research group may have been the ones who came across as patronizing in class, when what they were doing was speaking out of their experience. Altheir wrote, "Oddly enough I think I would say I have experienced some

'experience-ism.'" As a person who had been a minister for many years, she had much to share. Yet, "I have sensed resentment on the part of a couple of students if I talk from my experience, so I keep a low profile, go with the flow, do my work, and learn." As portrayed in the previous section, another woman felt silenced by a professor who told her she was talking too much in class: she felt that the professor did not "appreciate" what she had to share, and she even "had this way of making me feel like I didn't know as much as other students." However, the professor may have perceived this midlife woman as intimidating to other students, while the woman herself felt she was being bold by speaking up in class and sharing out of her personal experience.

While none of my research participants named any experiences of gender bias, several did mention experiences related to sexual orientation. One of the lesbian participants stated, "The professors have been awesome about 'gay." She had found them "welcoming and open to discussing queer issues." The difficulties she had experienced were with other students, who had made some "surprising remarks." The other lesbian participant wrote, "It's been my experience that being gay at CST is very well-accepted, and may even add a certain 'coolness." From one heterosexual woman's perspective, the "coolness" of being gay had possibly gone overboard: "The most prejudice that I've found here was not being able, you know, I have to almost whisper, 'I'm straight." She felt that the oppressed had become the oppressor, so that being straight was now "bad" or "deviant."

The participant who identified herself as bisexual shared that she had "had a couple run-ins" with a particular administrator, whom she felt needed some cultural

sensitivity training and education, both in relation to sexual orientation and race. The administrator did not understand the nuances and complexities of being a person of color in the United States, and this participant had decided, "I won't go see her anymore. . . It's like, I don't wanna be embarrassed, or embarrassed for her, or have to try and educate her, or whatever." She also had had a painful experience of white students being insensitive one time when she arrived to meet with them and heard them saying, "Oh, we have to talk about the race thing again,' rolling their eyes." This participant's own sensitivity made her "aware of how privileged the people are that get to come here, and I feel like I don't fit in." She often wondered how she came to be in seminary. Another woman similarly reflected on many students' blindness to their own privilege and contextually-determined perspectives:

I have experienced an economic bias—American students do not seem to have a good understanding of the poverty that exists in countries such as Nigeria, where I was born, and I often find it frustrating to hear them talk disparagingly about West African ideas on homosexuality or other issues.

One of the Korean participants shared her concern that American students often take comments made by Korean students and overgeneralize them to be representative of the whole Korean culture:

As a different culture, sometimes, . . . we talk about our Korean culture to you guys, but we feel that when you heard what we are talking, you feel that [represents the] general culture. But it's not. We are just talking about one aspect. . . . For example, when I take the Introductory Pastoral Care, [there was a discussion about how] Korean man, Korean husband is violent to his wife. Actually, it's not general. But when you guys heard that, many people consider that as a general thing. So, 'Wow, Korean men are very bad.' But, it's not [true].

Another woman of color said she had "had confrontations about being black," but for the most part, among the student body, "racism wasn't the issue." Rather, "I had to fight to

be a Jesus person." She observed,

So what's happening is, we want to bring in everybody. But we don't want you to become yourself. Because in this new world, your Jesus is just not—he has to be over here. Real diversity happens when people do and don't agree, and they're willing to engage in meaningful conversation and dialog and grow from it. Instead, we just all sit and we look good, 'cause we all different.

This participant thought that many of the professors were not adequately engaging the real diversity of theological perspectives and beliefs in their classrooms: "If we're the ones waving the flag that we're the pluralistic, inclusive, diverse [school], and we wavin' the flag, we need to do more than wave the flag." Everyone's perspective needs to be taken into consideration, otherwise some will feel marginalized, as this woman did: "Just don't put me out. Let me have discourse too. I can be open to other things. But don't make me drop what I believe."

Dena also named the liberal bias prevalent at CST: "We talk about this all over the place at CST. It's the big problem here. It's the assumption of liberalism, which isn't necessarily true. And I think conservatives suffer here. I've had a friend leave; I get it." However, she had found that her "perspective lines up pretty well with CST politics." So, after being at CST for awhile, she became "a little bit more willing to acknowledge when I'm more conservative than some people in the room." Another woman observed that CST was "struggling to figure out" who it was,

And as it goes through its identity crisis of wanting to be everything to everybody, I almost feel that Christian beliefs are being pushed aside to accommodate other faiths who come with other needs and interests. And I have some resentment for that.

In talking about "the moving over of the Christian faith" and making it secondary to other religious traditions, this participant added that "white Christians" carry a sense of guilt

that is not shared by all Christians: "I don't think all of us as Christians have that same feeling—we owe the world, 'cause we've screwed everybody, out of land, out of beliefs and language and all of that."

On the other end of the theological spectrum, some of the more liberal participants had struggled with the inclusion of conservative students at CST. One woman was surprised when she came to CST and found that her entering class "had a surprising number of conservative people." During her first two years, she often wanted to tell her fellow conservative students,

There are hundreds of places for you to go. There are not that many places for people like me, where we can go.... You people have kind of overtaken Christianity. You've hijacked it. So, why are you here?.... This is my school.

"But on the other hand," she continued, "that's another reason why I really do like CST. It's open to everybody." She saw the transformative potential for conservatives who attended CST, because the faculty "work in a way to help people overcome certain things and broaden people's minds, so hopefully people who have more narrow views learn something that kind of broadens their thinking." However, this transformative pedagogical process could be an exasperating one to some liberal students, such as the Unitarian Universalist participant:

I think, in order to teach the conservative ones, to move onto process [theology], which is slightly more liberal, that a lot of focus was on them. And so, I know it wasn't an intentional butting us out, for a reason to shut us up, but it was more, we were kind of shut up because the focus kept getting more conservative in order to move this group along. And so I found that frustrating.

In addition, this UU woman had struggled with the assumption that everyone in her courses was Christian, and thus, she did not always feel included in or connect with the

discussions and exercises in her classes.

On a different note, one participant observed a bias against M.Div. students. In one class in particular, the professor did not call on the M.Div. students, because it was assumed they did not have background in the subject matter of the class. However, after this participant "scored extremely well" on the midterm, she "was called on a lot." While this bias was rather explicit, there is also an implicit bias expressed when professors allow Ph.D. students to "dominate the conversation":

In other classes I have noticed, and many of my classmates have commented on, how the class changes if the class contains a significant number of Ph.D. students. Many times the class discussion achieves a level of specificity and perhaps sophistication [to the point] that the M.Div. students get left behind.

While very few of the experiences of bias participants shared with me were solely or directly related to being female midlife seminarians, there are other ways in which being a middle-aged woman attending theological school can be difficult. These will be discussed in the next section.

#### Being a Female Midlife Seminarian

To pinpoint other theological school experiences specifically related to their gender and age, I asked participants, "Are there struggles or issues you have encountered that are particular to being a midlife woman attending theological school?" As mentioned in previous sections, several participants felt they were less adept students because of their age; their brains and bodies could not do what they used to do when they were younger students. Memorizing information was more difficult and took longer, and the ability to retain information did not seem as good as it used to be. Some women found it difficult to stay focused in class or to follow what was being said. Jane shared, "It's like

the kids will say something, and either they're really brilliant or my brain's disengaging because I can't follow what they're saying." She felt this experience was sometimes related to age and sometimes due to being tired. Nancy commented on the difficulty of taking notes in class, but she was not sure this experience was unique to older students:

You're typing what you've already heard. But you're taking in the new stuff. Sometimes, I just can't. I'll get three words, and it's like, *Oh, my God, I've no idea what he just said.* The whole sentence is gone. . . . So that's frustrating.

Along with not being able to maintain focus, some participants struggled with self-discipline or felt they had less "energy and stamina" than younger students. For Nancy, figuring out how to organize her time well helped her "to not be on the edge of exhaustion most of the time" during her second semester of seminary. Another woman who had been through chemotherapy shared,

I see the results of chemo more readily than if I had not gone into an academic setting. I think it's really messed with my ability to read and to stay focused. I think it has messed with my attention span. . . . When I'm tired I have to stop. I just have to stop. And adjusting to that has been tough. Sometimes I have to stop when I shouldn't stop. So then I pay for it later. That fatigue is part of what I've been through.

This participant noted that she could not separate going through cancer from the aging process to know which was the reason for the issues and struggles she named. In my study, the women who had experienced cancer, hormonal imbalances, or a recent significant loss were the ones who struggled the most with energy levels and focus.

Other women talked about the struggle to manage and balance everything in their lives—family, work, school, and church—while also "trying to have a personal life!"

Hannah expressed regret that she had not started her graduate work earlier, because going to school meant she had not given her adolescent children the time and attention she felt

they needed. Sierra lamented, "As far as having an outside life, it's very, very hard.

Everything is school oriented. . . . When you start having to miss church functions and family functions to work on your program, it's frustrating." For Momma G, "School was an additional ball to juggle in life." She felt a sense of isolation from the school community because she did not have the time to get involved in activities beyond her classes. Plus, "You don't really fit in with the young people." The struggles and concerns of a middle-aged woman are different than a young adult's. Momma G offered the following example: "One of the kids said, 'Why didn't you move when you got into seminary?' Well, because I have a house and two kids. I don't just move." Being a single parent with a house means, "We talk with the mortgage company once a month, trying to squeak out some more grace. It's been a huge financial hardship." Similarly, Myfanwy responded to my question about being a midlife seminary student by sharing the following struggles: "the need to make ends meet financially, to find time to do the things that need to be done around the home, and to be there for my children if they have an issue." However, for her, this was "nothing out of the ordinary!"

Drawing on the work of sociologist Lewis Coser, Rosalind Edwards names both the family and higher education as "greedy institutions." According to Coser, greedy institutions are organizations or groups that "seek exclusive and undivided loyalty" as they "attempt to encompass within their circle the whole personality"; "their demands on the person are omnivorous." Within the institution of the family, "women, more so than

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Rosalind Edwards, *Mature Women Students: Separating or Connecting Family and Education* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1993), 63.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Lewis A. Coser, *Greedy Institutions: Patterns of Undivided Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1974), 4.

men, are expected to be constantly available to meet their families' physical and emotional needs." At the same time, graduate theological schools have been designed and structured for single young men without children. There is often an expectation that school is the center of students' lives, and, therefore, they can immerse themselves in the total experience, living on campus and participating in extracurricular activities as well as being wholly committed to their studies, able to separate themselves "from the concerns of daily living for concentrated periods of intellectual activity." Hayes states that "women's response to this situation often seems to be an effort to meet all the demands, and to blame themselves for failure."71 While I heard comments from two or three research participants pointing to feelings of inadequacy that they thought might be resolved by more discipline or organization, most women blamed the school institution for placing too many demands and expectations on them. Noticeably, only two participants, both young Korean mothers, referred to family demands as interfering with the quality of their school work. In the eyes of the Western women, if they could not keep up with their school workloads, it was professors' fault for assigning too much work. A few of the participants also recognized that many of the social and extracurricular aspects of the seminary experience were geared more toward younger students. They recognized that they were in a different place and had to make conscious, self-reflective decisions about the activities and events in which they could or could not participate.

Several of the women, including a few who had shared struggles and issues, pointed to the positive side of being midlife seminarians. Sierra shared, "Part of me

Hayes, "Social Contexts," 47.Hayes, "Social Contexts," 47.

<sup>71</sup> Hayes, "Social Contexts," 47.

thinks I should have done this back when I was in my mid to late twenties, but then I wouldn't be the same person. I wouldn't have the experiences that I've had to bring into the classroom." With age and experience comes a loss of idealistic expectations, so, as Dena observed, one is more open to hearing the message that ministry will be difficult, and thus, one is attentive to suggestions for dealing with different situations. Yet, she thought it was "going to be weird" to be her age as a pastor without the professional experience of other pastors her age. For Nancy, it was "amazing and thrilling to be recreating myself at 55." Julie noted that without her theological school experience, "I would have never thought about my life." Having this opportunity to engage in personal reflection and growth work, she felt, would make it easier if she happened to experience "another midlife crisis" in her forties or fifties, because "I already did, like, groundwork here." Pauline also saw her theological education as a personal journey: "The work that I'm doing, I understand, relates to me and not to anybody else. And so, there's like this satisfaction in growing and comfort level about doing this."

## Effects of Theological Education on Midlife Women

Education aims toward producing change. Sometimes the change may be limited to the addition of new knowledge or skills. Other times, deep transformations in perspective and identity are set in motion. Theological education explores domains of knowing that are core to persons—their faiths, their spiritualities, their religious identities. These are their meaning-making systems. Because it touches on what is central to how people approach their worlds and often challenges people to reflect on and question presuppositions, theological education can be deeply disturbing and

transformative. It can change beliefs, actions, and assumptions about oneself and others. For some theological school students, the changes they experience may be subtle, even barely perceptible. Other students have their whole worldviews transformed and their lives reoriented or rewritten.

I tried to tap into these experiences of change by asking questions specifically directed at whether participants had experienced changes in their spiritual lives or in their views of their faith traditions, themselves, other people, or the world. However, as one woman pointed out in response to my question regarding changes in how she viewed herself, "Everything is connected and interwoven . . . Who I am is a result of everything that has happened." Faith and belief are so central, that, for many, they are integral to personal identity. Changes in theology and spirituality cannot be separated from changes in views of the self or views of the world and other people. They are all mixed together in the experience of being a theological student. A change in one particular perspective can affect the whole system of perspectives. Nonetheless, despite the overlaps across categories in participants' responses to my questions, I will break down the effects of theological education on participants according to the following categories: views of one's religious tradition, theology and spirituality, views of self and personal growth, and perspectives on the world and other people.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> The questions were as follows: "Has there been a connection between your educational experience at CST and your spiritual life? How so? In other words, has your spirituality or your spiritual life changed as a result of your theological education, and if so, how?" "As a result of attending CST, have you experienced any changes in how you experience or view your faith or religious tradition? If so, please describe them." "Have you experienced any changes in how you view yourself as a result of attending CST? If so, what are they?" "Have you experienced any changes in your perspective on the world and other people? If so, please explain."

# Views of One's Religious Tradition

When Altheia first became a seminary student at the age of 31, she was still new to Christianity. She "knew pretty much nothing about being a Christian . . . having been baptized at the age of 28." Thus, she wrote, she was "a theological virgin . . . a clean, or better yet, a blank slate." Almost everything at seminary was novel to her. Nancy expressed a similar sentiment. She had grown up "in the Methodist Church, but I left it when I was 18." After thirty-five years of being "essentially unchurched," she became involved in an Episcopalian congregation about two years before she began seminary. Thus, "I have not been doing this for very long. So, it's all new to me. And it's all fascinating." While the other women in my study came to theological school with more of a background in the Christian tradition, the information, understandings, and perspectives they encountered at CST were sometimes no less new to them than they were to Altheia or Nancy.

The educational experiences that were probably the least disruptive to personal faith were those that involved Christian history and understandings of individuals' denominational traditions. Nonetheless, these could be eye-opening experiences. For at least one participant, it was "a whole education" for her to learn about "the injustices that have been done in the name of God and how it affected parts of the world." For other participants, their understanding of the role of Christianity in world history was simply expanded. Dena shared that she had become more fully aware "of the imperialistic side of Christianity" and was "a little disappointed to sort of see the depth of it."

A few participants noted that they had gained knowledge about the Christian

tradition, including how different denominations developed and what the beliefs connected with those denominations are. For Jackie, it was "really useful" to learn the origins and "basics" of the Catholic tradition in which she grew up, along with the Protestant tradition that she had been part of all her adult life. In addition, "It's been very helpful to me to get the history of Christianity and think about theology and how new ideas keep sending us down new roads, and sometimes that breaks churches apart and new groups go their separate ways." Similarly, Dena had found it enlightening to see how much she still had in common theologically with the tradition of her childhood and yet how much she aligned with the denominational tradition of which she was currently a part. This had strengthened her commitment to that tradition. Studying the Christian tradition helped the Unitarian Universalist participant feel additionally grateful that she had discovered Unitarian Universalism, in which she was not expected to accept anything simply "on faith" or have a high Christology and in which she could explore what various religious traditions had to offer. She said, "I knew I was in the right place, but this sort of has cemented it." Nonetheless, she recognized that it was helpful to understand the Christian foundations of Unitarian Universalism, and she was focused on learning practices that would help her to "be a better UU."

Several of the Methodist participants talked about how much they had enjoyed learning the history and theology of Methodism. Altheia observed that having "a better base of understanding" through her previous theological studies had made her study of Methodist history and polity more interesting than her previous study of the history and polity of the Christian Church: "Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell were not nearly

as exciting to me as are John and Charles Wesley. Wesleyan theology is very much a part of what I preach and teach in my church. I love this Methodism." CJ had gained a new view of John Wesley and had come to see him as a hero. Similarly, Martha had been fascinated by Wesley's life and spiritual journey as well as by the study of Methodism throughout the world. Elise had been moved by the "richness of Methodist history" and appreciated gaining a "deeper understanding of the Book of Discipline and its history." She learned to distinguish between what was "ease of administration learned over the years" and the core calling to serve everyone.

Some of the education regarding religious traditions was not directly related to coursework, but was a part of the experience of being a seminarian preparing for a particular ministry. An Episcopalian participant had become more aware of "the political mechanisms" of that denomination, "and in some ways, it can be really disturbing to me." Yet, she was trying to work out her relationship to her church through the lenses of her call and what it means to be a minister in that denomination. A Methodist woman had decided that she was not going to remain with her denomination, because she had realized that "the UMC is not keen on ordaining people to chaplaincy," which was her career goal. She wanted to be an elder so she would have "sacramental rights," but elders in the UMC were expected to serve in parishes. In addition, she shared, "The issue of homosexuality still being 'against Christian life' has also increased my disillusion with Methodism." Therefore, she was investigating other denominational options. For the Catholic participant, the issue was not her view of her tradition, but others' views, which she became more aware of as a CST student. "It seems to me that we have fallen short of

sharing ourselves in kind and gentle ways with people," she said, and she desired to improve the image of Roman Catholicism by sharing "love better and more profoundly."

Courses in biblical studies had the most profound impact on some midlife women's understandings of their Christian religious tradition. Perspectives on the Bible are, for many Christians, integrally related to faith, theology, and spirituality. Since this was true of the women in my study who discussed the influence of Bible courses on their views and understandings, these discussions will be included in the next section on changes in theology and spirituality.

## Theology and Spirituality

As I observed in Chapter 5, theology and spirituality walk hand-in-hand, so one cannot be altered without affecting the other. Likewise, changes in biblical understandings lead to changes in theology and spirituality, since many people's theologies are based on what the Bible says (or what they believe it says), and they have made a spiritual practice of reading the Bible and applying its contents to their lives.

Sierra observed, "My biblical studies classes are the ones that brought me the most change as far as my religious beliefs." What Sierra had learned in her Bible courses at CST had caused her to discard many of the things she had been taught in the evangelical conservative movement she had been involved in for many years. She shared:

The more I study and the more I listen, and the more I see where the professors are going, the easier it has been for me to let go of a lot of literalism that I had regarding the Bible and realize, well, that's a story, and it can be used to teach us certain truths.

She had gained a new perspective on the Bible as not "written by the hand of God" but written by culturally-bound people. Through her New Testament course, she had come to

see that the four gospels were really written by different authors who were part of separate communities that varied in "how they viewed Jesus." Understanding that, and that "there are many more gospels that didn't make it into the canon of the Bible," she continued to reflect,

What's next? Well, maybe Jesus really didn't say these things. These are things he could have said or these are things he could have done. But when you start comparing the four gospels to each other, they're all out of whack. It's like, wait a second, you're messing with me.

It is one thing to challenge a literal understanding of the Adam and Eve story as factually true, and it is another to begin to question what Jesus said and did and even who he was: "When professors in New Testament classes start talking about, 'Well, let's explore the idea that Jesus isn't God. Whoa, wait a minute. Now you're messin' with some stuff here. Just a second. Hold on. This is like, trippin' me out."

Although Sierra was still in the middle of her M.Div. program when I interviewed her, she had had some time to process her biblical studies courses. Jane, however, was in the process of taking her first set of Bible courses when I interviewed her. As Sierra had, she was experiencing the shock of having her previous understandings of the biblical text "messed with":

This semester, they're messing with my theology by way of how the New Testament was written—who wrote it and why they wrote it—and the Old Testament and who wrote it and why they wrote it and how it's been changed.

Previous structures for understanding the Bible were "going away." Yet, this was affecting her faith in a positive direction:

As those are going away, that faith is getting deeper. It's not about the New Testament or the Old Testament or whatever rules man has created, it's about that faith and that being-ness that we call God, that is just growing even more.

Nancy had had a similar experience of her faith being deepened and strengthened as a result of her New Testament course. She shared, "The closer you come to the historical Jesus, sort of the farther you get away from the religious Jesus, you know what I mean? But, interestingly, when I go to church and worship at church, my faith feels stronger." Nancy found this interesting because it seemed as if what she was learning at school would cause her to go to church and think, "This is a bunch of bullshit." "But that's not really what's happening," she continued. However, she was "hearing the sermons in different ways" and listening more critically to theological concepts being expressed in church. She reflected that maybe this experience of "the farther I get away from that church Jesus, the deeper my faith becomes," was an

effect of . . . really looking for truth, . . . [T]he only thing I can sort of relate it to is a psychological process, like when you're in therapy and you're working on whatever it is you're working on at the time, and sort of the closer you get to your own truth, the more grounded you are.

Nancy felt that the closer she came to the truth of who Jesus was historically, the more in touch she became with what was foundational for her.

Another woman, who, like Sierra, was from a conservative background, took a different tack and determined she was not going to let Bible classes mess with her faith. She "protected" her faith from her seminary experiences in order to protect herself: "I separate what I see and learn here, observe here, from what I believe. Otherwise, I think I'd be really mixed up. And I don't wanna be." Yet she did see the value in understanding that people edited the original biblical texts and "influenced their narrative according to their special context," because "that explains the differences in opinions and differences in the story." She could use that knowledge to address those who "will say, 'Well, the

Bible is not consistent.' I have an answer to that now, so I can pick and choose my arguments a little better. But I still believe the Bible is God's Holy Word." She asserted that this belief would not change: "There's no -ology, there's no Q or Q+, that's gonna change my mind that this is God's Holy Word."

Intellectual study of the Bible can be profoundly spiritual and deepen spiritual practices of scripture study. Jackie expressed this when she talked about her experience of doing exegetical work for a Hebrew Bible paper: "It took me really, really deep. Almost to the point where I was sort of scared, not really, but just sort of in awe when it was time to go back and write some more on that paper." It was amazing to her what she found in biblical texts when she studied them closely. Reflecting on her experiences with exegeting texts, she said, "Stuff has been very personal, and very engaging, but also forward moving for me." Bible courses had helped Beth think about the Bible from a historical-critical perspective, and this had affected her spiritual practice of scripture study. She had "found myself to be more critical in my Bible study—really spending time with the text and trying to discern what it's really telling me, what I can take away from it." Altheia's "first 'AHA' experience in seminary" came when she heard a "professor say one thing: 'Don't you get it, the Judeans hated the Samaritans.' From that point onward, everything about my seminary experience began to make sense and has been integral in my spiritual journey through the past twenty-nine years." The revelation to her was:

Being a good neighbor has nothing to do with who you are, where you are from, or even if you are a card-carrying Christian. The good neighbor in all the world for all time is the one who shows mercy to another human being!!!

With this insight, she was "hooked"; she wanted "to read and explore and learn what all of the stories meant. I wanted to look beyond the margins, behind the scenes, so to speak, and discover the treasures that so surprised me that day and reveal them to everyone."

Thus, studying the Bible changed Altheia's spiritual and vocational direction as well as her theological perspective, beginning with what a "good neighbor" is.

Theological studies had helped Vicky come to a fresh perspective on who Jesus was for her. He was "a liberal" who focused on the work of social justice; he spoke his mind and challenged authorities. This liberal Jesus gave Vicky support for her own liberal views as she argued with her minister husband about politics. Another participant had developed new Christological understandings through her coursework as well. Momma G shared that "being at school has really helped me clarify Jesus as person, Jesus as Christ, the difference between the two of them." Tied to this, she had developed her ability to express her understanding of the Trinity. Seminary also resolved for her her struggle with the question of, "If God is so loving, why did he *send* his son to the cross?" She came to believe that angering religious and political authorities through his teachings was what led to Jesus' crucifixion and that the teachings were God's will, but the death of Jesus on a cross was not. So, "the resurrection is where the Christ comes in, and that's where the salvation is." Summing up what she had learned from reading *Proverbs of Ashes*, she said:

Suffering isn't redemptive. And God is about love; God isn't punitive. And that was a huge breakthrough for me. Huge breakthrough. I find it very difficult in the church when people are so invested in 'Jesus died for us and for our sins.' And the hymns—you know, I see my son on the cross—and those bloody Jesus hymns I just can't sing anymore. I just can't do it.

Through all this rethinking of her theology, Momma G realized, "I am invested in the life of Jesus as Christ and the resurrection of Jesus as Christ. That is an important part of my faith. . . . I need my Christ."

Like Momma G, Natalie felt "even more strongly about my faith now than before I took theology classes. I can express my faith better." In addition:

Through the Interfaith Dialogue and Peacemaking course, including the trip to Israel and Palestine, I have gained a deeper understanding of the incarnation and of God being the God of all three Abrahamic faiths. I've learned how to be proud of my Christian faith while among people of other faiths, atheists, and agnostics, while not offending them or trying to convert them.

Similary, Elise had gained "a deeper understanding of the Trinity" through her seminary studies. She did not think her theology had changed, but she had developed a "more systematic way of thinking about it."

Some women in my study struggled with the presentation of unfamiliar God language and images, particularly "Mother God." The breakthrough for one woman came when she heard a fellow student pray to "God as father." This bridged "the gap" for her. Saying "God is Mother" or "Mother God" did not work for her, but "God as mother" made sense.

God as mother works. Because that's that creation part, that's that birthing, that's that, you know, loving, . . . I could deal with God as "lover" even. He could fill me out. . . . But God is Mother, no. "Mother God"—that didn't work, either. I mean, I can conceptualize it, but it didn't work. But I can, in a congregation, I can help move them into that next level with "God as." . . . "We come to you, Father God, God as our mother. As you're taking care of us, God as our friend, . . ." I can move it. But I couldn't move just Mother. And maybe you can later on down the road, but I needed someplace to start, and it started with me. Now I'm like, hey, God can be anything the child want him to be.

The image of a male, Father God was too embedded in this woman's psyche and spiritual

knowing for her to move quickly to the female image of God represented by the language of "Mother God." However, she was willing to work toward that end because she saw the liberative potential in the image. The way to change for her was to think of the ways in which God functioned like a mother. A friend of hers was also struggling with the "Mother God," concept and language, so she shared her revelation about "God as" with her. This helped her friend to "get it" as well. The friend shared with me that she had become

more sensitive to language choices, because 'Father,' to me, I'm comfortable with it, but I realize others aren't. So I'm trying to be a little bit more generic depending on the audience. . . . I can't say, 'God is Mother.' It just doesn't feel right to me. It's fine for those people, but to me, uh-uh.

A third woman initially thought the mother image of God was "funny." She had grown up with a concept of God as an authority figure far away in heaven, but she did not want her daughter to grow up with the same rigid concepts of God she did. As she changed her understandings and image of God, she saw her daughter developing an immanent, feminine sense of God, a God who "is in my heart" and "more nice and warm." This was how she was beginning to experience God as well, as a "more feminine" figure who "takes care" of people.

In talking about changes in their theological perspectives, a couple women revealed a shift in their epistemologies from an absolute way of thinking to a more relativistic or contextual understanding. Myfanwy had previously been in a quandary "regarding spiritual path—what was right, wrong or indifferent. I now see my religious tradition as a choice and my spiritual path as an experience with God that is informed by my own past experience and the experiences of others who have gone before." Likewise,

Beth had learned that "your theology is your theology." She believed that God wants people to be "free thinkers," to serve, "but to be creative in that."

In addition to changes in their theological understandings and images of the Divine, participants changed their concepts of what spirituality is, learned new spiritual practices, and grew spiritually. For one woman, the experience of going through cancer in the middle of her M.Div. studies had dramatically affected her views of what was most important in life. Spirituality had become more broadly defined to include everything, and her personal spirituality had become more integrative of mind, spirit, and body. Similarly, Hannah had expanded the focus of her spirituality beyond making a direct, "vertical connection with God," to thinking about humanity. As a result of learning about process theology, how she approached prayer had changed as well. She came to see it more as being about seeking God's will than asking for things. After struggling to understand the intent of the contemplative practices taught in a spiritual formation class, Julie came to the conclusion that spirituality was about self-contemplation and feeding herself spiritually, and it was not about being able to claim spiritual authority. Spiritual practices are meant to aim people toward being better persons and toward what "God wants."

As noted in the section on meaningful courses, several women had found their spiritual formation classes informative, helpful, and enriching. They gained resources for their personal spiritualities and for teaching others. Elise and Anne had taken the class in teaching spiritual practices, and they both talked about how important it was to learn that people connect with the Divine in different ways and to learn various methods of praying

and meditating as well as how to teach people those methods. Anne shared that the practices she had learned had changed the way she interacted with other people. The UU participant said that the spiritual formation classes had enriched her spiritual life. She enjoyed learning the backgrounds behind the practices, their histories and purposes. This then gave the practices more meaning to her. She also found it helpful and hopeful to know that there was a spiritual way to bring the Eastern and Christian traditions together, and she saw the potential for transformation in the world through teaching people the spiritual practices she had learned.

Taking a spiritual formation course at CST was not necessary for learning new practices or growing spiritually, however. Bonnie learned the practice of silence from a professor who gradually worked his class up to spending five minutes in silence at the beginning of each class period. Altheia shared that taking Methodist history, polity, and evangelism courses had "deepened my spirituality even more, as I have come to know and appreciate the Wesleyan Method." Other women spoke of becoming "more disciplined," "more in tune with my own spirituality," "more in touch spiritually and with who I am," "more spiritually aware," more in tune with where others are, and more grounded in all aspects of their lives. Myfanwy discovered she had a spiritual "center from which I can expand. I was so eclectic before that I didn't realize I had a center." Another woman shared that seminary had "changed how I feel about animals." Connecting with the lives of non-human creatures, she had come to understand, "There's a sweetness to life that . . . I didn't realize. It's become more accessible to me."

The demands of attending theological school and the struggle to make meaning

from all the novel material can separate a person from her spirituality. Dena expressed many people's feelings when she said that the "workload kind of keeps you from having a lot of time to languish in God." The lack of time for spiritual practices, particularly yoga, was one thing Nancy really did not like about seminary: "My body hurts; I've gained weight. This process is antithetical to the opening of one's spirit and one's heart." For Nancy, yoga "opens my heart, and so this process of being still, of energy being stagnant, of being too much in my head, of feeling separated from my body, is not a great thing." The demands of studying were taking time away from giving her body "the expression that it needs to have." Thus, she found engaging in theological studies to be "spiritually deadening."

Vicky had struggled to bring together the inclusiveness advocated at CST with her Christian tradition's exclusivist attitude toward other religions. She said that she had been given "too many things to consider" theologically and in trying to sort it all out, she had become disconnected her from her spirituality. Before attending CST, Julie had felt a "responsibility to read the Bible. So, I read it, kinda 'cause I have to. That's my practice. That's what I had to do, no question." However, through her studies, she had come to see that as a "fundamentalist" way of thinking, so she decided that she no longer would engage in spiritual practices out of a sense of duty, but because she wanted to and they were meaningful to her. Thus, she "dropped every habit" that she previously had, and when I interviewed her, she was still trying to figure out what would be meaningful for her. For one first-year student, however, "the more trouble I had, the deeper my faith grew, out of necessity, 'cause I couldn't understand that God had brought me here to

drown." She found her "base" and her faith "stayed" and "grew" as she maintained a "trust that God was there."

#### Views of Self and Personal Growth

When I asked Jackie if she had experienced any changes in how she viewed herself as a result of attending CST, she responded, "How can you not?" Indeed, all the women in my study had experienced some form of personal growth or a change in how they viewed themselves as a result of being a seminary student. It can be difficult to notice such changes, because they can occur slowly and subtly, barely noticeable to the one experiencing them. Therefore, the women in my study may have changed more than they realized or than they were able to express.

Myfanwy summed up her personal development over four semesters of seminary as follows:

I have discovered a sense of foundation and purpose that I realize was always there, though I was not aware of it. From that foundation, I have discovered a new sense of self worth that has allowed me to become less controlling over certain aspects of my own life and those around me.

In these two sentences, Myfanwy expressed the three major themes I found in participants' descriptions of changes in themselves and their views of themselves. These themes are: (1) affirmations of callings, purposes, strengths, and beliefs; (2) the development of a clearer and more positive sense of self; and (3) changes in ways of being or approaches to life and other people. These themes will form the primary structure for this section, although for some women, they work together.

As theological school students, several of the women in my study found affirmations of what their call or purpose was, of who they were and of their gifts and

abilities, and that they were not alone in their beliefs and experiences. Elise became "more in touch" with who she was and more aware of "the ability I had before I even got here, to sort of take a step back and see what people are really upset about, and hear what they are really talking about." Recognizing her gifts and abilities and becoming more in touch with those gave her a "sense of surety" that her calling was to administration, the "ordering of church life." Similarly, Anne shared, "I've gotten a lot of affirmation of who I am and what I'm doing. . . . I think I just feel so much more myself." Jane "was pleased when I heard process theology, because it didn't make me feel so crazy—not that I felt crazy. It didn't make me feel like I was out there that far. 'Cause you talk to other Christians like this, and they think the devil's on your shoulder." Likewise, Myfanwy credited "the pluralistic and accepting perspective that is a part of CST's outlook," for the empowering realization "that though my life experiences have been unique, so have others lived their own unique lives, and that it is ok to be different."

When CJ began seminary, "it was almost hard to take myself seriously." She thought this endeavor might just be "a flight of fancy" or a "piece of insanity." But "it felt right on the inside," and this feeling was confirmed through her school experience. As Pauline learned to understand service as being about reaching out to "the person in front of me," rather than teaching "thousands of people or [having] ten missions a year," she gained clarity that her direction, her purpose, had to do with "creativity and service."

Several of the women in my study spoke of feeling more confident and strong as a result of attending theological school. This often went along with gaining a greater awareness of what their strengths were or of coming to recognize their own voice and

leadership skills that I wasn't aware of, people skills that have been tested and stretched a little bit more." One Korean woman shared that she had learned to value herself as a human being and to think about and for herself. "In Korean culture, a woman, especially a wife, sacrifices for her family." At CST, "I'm thinking about myself. And, especially, all the classes are very focusing on humanity," so she had begun thinking about what was important for herself as a person, as an individual human being. Developing and being encouraged to express her own perspectives had helped give her a sense of "self-confidence." Similarly, another Korean woman expressed that she had learned to see herself as a person first and as "an actor in my life." She had gained a stronger voice and a sense of what she thought. "Even if I have the same lifestyle, the attitude toward myself is changing, my life is changing." She was no longer living "for somebody else." The third Korean participant also mentioned that she had become more confident and strong, as well as less bothered by how others viewed her. In a similar vein, CJ, an older white woman, said she had grown "stronger in following my own voice."

The first year of seminary is crucially formative and may determine whether some students continue their graduate theological studies. Nancy felt bolstered when she saw her first semester grades: "Doing well last semester gave me a lot of confidence—it's like, I can do this. 'Cause you enter here, you don't know. . . . So, I have confidence that ok, I'm gonna make it; I'm gonna get through these few years." Another woman shared that she felt "a little more confident" after her first year. She found it "strange" to have "some of the first-year students kind of look up to me," and it gave her a different

perspective on herself. She understood herself as a person in process and was optimistic that by the time she was done with her seminary education "and the training that I need to go through, that I'll be reasonably confident in myself" and ready to be a pastor.

Part of the formational process of seminary is learning to see oneself as a religious leader. One participant noted that this process began during her first week of classes when a theology professor said, "From this day forward you are theologians." She understood that she had been given an identity as a theologian. This identity was affirmed as she found that when people asked her questions about the Bible, "all of a sudden the things come out," even though "I don't really know that much." When I interviewed her, Nancy was beginning to realize "that I'm gonna be stepping into a leadership role that I'm very unfamiliar with. . . . I'm gonna have to . . . preach. That's kind of wild. That's kind of a wild thing for me." After five years of seminary, Natalie was able to say, "I view myself openly as a church leader. I feel more confident than I did before attending CST." Likewise, a newly graduated student looked back on her seminary career and saw that she "had grown up a lot" and become a new person. She had not only gained knowledge and understanding, but she had learned to think critically about pastoral dilemmas. As her graduation date approached, she "was ready" and aching to go out and use what she had learned.

When midlife women add the stresses of being a graduate student to their already busy, stressful lives, there frequently comes a point where decisions have to be made about what is most important. For one overachieving woman with three children at home and a career, that point came one Thanksgiving when she had to weigh writing

commissioning papers against spending time with her family; she decided for her family. Throughout her time at CST, this woman had struggled to let go of her drive to always do more than was necessary on her schoolwork. She realized that grades were "not relevant" to what she wanted to do,

And yet, I couldn't get myself to just do enough. I was always doing more. . . . I had to go the extra step on everything I did. And it's really taken until about this year to be able to say, "Yeah, no. I don't need to do that anymore."

She became "conscious about finding balance in my life," and she learned to "say 'no' to things in a way that I didn't as the overachieving, Super-Mom."

After undergoing cancer treatments in the midst of her studies, another overachieving, straight-A student changed her approach to school: "I decided, you know what, I can't get an A in every single course. I will pick one course that speaks to my heart and I will focus on that course, and the other two, I will do my best." She determined, "I'm not going to kill myself over my academics." A third student had learned that she did not have to come up with a new or unique perspective on a topic, "to be the first or the only"; she just needed to "be myself. I need to kind of bring my own version to it. . . . I think what that means, really, is, if I can be my full self, then I will be the only one in the world." Therefore, she was "trying to find that balance of empowerment to become the best version of myself so that anything" she said would be original.

As a seminary student, Jane had come to place a priority on responding to the needs of others. She shared, "I'm having to learn how to stop judging my actions, or my laziness, or my putting off. It's, I'm connected. I'll get it done when it's appropriate to

get it done; my daughter needs me now." Friends would come to her with problems and she would make time for them.

because I know that's part of our journey here, because we're going to have to learn how to do that when we get out. And the paper will get done. Even if it's four in the morning, it'll get done. So, yes, my whole outlook has changed.

Rather than connecting more with others, Jackie had felt herself becoming more introverted "and more private" as a student. She attributed that to the culture of CST, where "we're so reflective, we're always reflecting on what we learn and need to be. And that takes privacy. . . . I think they are designing us. We're getting molded to be I's," or introverts, in terms of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). In fact, Jackie had taken the MBTI before attending seminary and was a "big E" or extrovert. She took it again at the end of her M.Div. program, and she had moved along the Introvert-Extrovert scale until she was well in the introvert range.

Changes in theology, spirituality, and how one relates to and views oneself affect how one views and approaches other people. Changes in perspective regarding other people will be part of the next section, but here a few examples will be given of how participants had changed in the ways they treated and responded to others.

Through her experiences as a seminarian, Pauline made a connection between learning to view herself more compassionately and extending that compassion to others. She realized that her behaviors were often based in painful events that happened "long ago." Developing this understanding of herself and learning to give herself compassion, she was then able to see how others' actions were also based in their past experiences. Thus, she recognized that "the woundedness in people is where they need the most

compassion. And if you don't have the understanding, you can still sort of trust that that is where you need to be gentle with them." Although Pauline had not taken any of the spiritual formation courses taught by Frank Rogers and Andy Dreitcer, her learning process demonstrates one aspect of the "Compassion Practice" taught in those courses. Another woman who had taken several of Rogers and Dreitcer's spiritual formation courses felt that the spiritual practices she had learned in those courses had shaped her to be more compassionate and loving.

Several women in my study observed that they had become more open-minded, less judgmental, and more empathic through their time as seminarians. Momma G wrote, "I am much more tolerant and thoughtful, much more willing to observe and listen. My question in most circumstances is, 'Where is God in this?' This approach is different from my past, more impulsive, approach." Similarly, Beth had come to listen to people with more of a "spiritual frame of mind" and to ask, "Where are they coming from?" Natalie had grown by becoming

much more empathetic to homosexuals, blacks, fundamentalist Christians, and people from minority groups than I was previously. I think I am far less judgmental than I used to be. I am also more patient and willing to listen to other people's views.

As these women listened more to other people, their views of them probably continued to change.

## Perspectives on the World and Other People

Changes in how others are viewed can alter how others are approached. Momma
G shared that she had come to see all people "as God's creations, valued and loved." This
understanding challenged her to "try to look deeper than the surface" and to listen more

to people. Similarly, Martha had developed the perspective that allowed her to say "every person is a child of God, even those who don't appear to be that way." Thus, her seminary education had helped her "to view every person with compassion." Observing "the strengths of different people, including myself," had helped another person realize "the uniqueness of people in the classrooms." In the same vein, Ray had noticed "the rainbow of talents and gifts and vocations" of people at CST and broadened her sense "of who God has called and for what purpose."

While a few participants had entered theological school as pluralists or relativists, many of the women in my study moved toward a greater acceptance of and respect for diverse perspectives, beliefs, religious traditions, cultures, and sexual orientations. This shift was based in encountering and being in class with persons who represented these diversities. Martha noted this in her interview:

There's a great diversity of faith experiences at CST, and I think it kind of opened my mind to that. There's a whole lot of different ways that people express their faith, within Methodism and in the ecumenical community and even in the interfaith community.

Being exposed to this diversity opened Martha to "appreciating other expressions of faith." Jackie shared that she had been challenged "to try to make connections of what things we have in common," because "we do need to live together." Momma G became "more understanding of the variety of religious thought," and became more aware of "how much of the world believes in some sort of God-ness, no matter how they call it."

One participant shared that CST's nonjudgmental perspective had taught her to respect and not judge others from different faith traditions, cultures, and races. Another woman noted that she had gained "a better view of other faiths" and "a better

understanding of LGB" concerns. A third person said that while she had never liked making judgments about others, her perspective and understanding had been expanded in terms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons. She had come to believe that "they're just born in that way, and God loves all." That was "a big change" for her.

For the Unitarian Universalist, the growing edge was coming to understand Christians and the sources of some of their perspectives. She was "awfully disappointed" when she figured out that for conservative Christians, sin is really important "to their dogma" and sin and sex are integrally related. "Finally seeing that argument and how it worked" helped her understand that "there's no way to extricate" sin from sex in the minds of that group of Christians. "Not that I'm going to give up fighting," she said, "but I'm not gonna waste effort over there, when other people that are sort of in the middle can be influenced."

Other pluralists or relativists were not immune to alterations in their thinking, either. One spoke of having her perspective "fleshed out" and "focused a little better, maybe." Another found

more of an affirmation of the perspective I have had for a long time. Before CST, I could verbalize my perspective, but I could not intelligently compare and/or contrast it [with] what I perceived to be the popular worldview that seemed to be quite different from my personal perception.

After a professor "labeled" her "a relativist," a first-year student began trying to formulate and rationalize her way of thinking and her "allowing" others to be where they are. Whereas before she had "bought what everybody else bought," she came "to understand that everybody has their context," and that "a Buddhist road is different, and it's going to a different place, but that's perfect for them." Her reflection process was

causing her "to be more allowing of where people are," and how she felt "about things and people and the world" was changing.

Several women communicated that they had increased their awareness of and sensitivity to the injustice and suffering in the world. Ray shared that she had "taken more time to listen to more of the human interest stories. And I had conversation or dialogue, actually, with myself as to why that is disturbing to me." Instead of just thinking, "Oh, isn't that a horrible story?" she had sought to analyze these happenings in the world from a theological and pastoral perspective, "trying to make sense" of them and "trying to figure out if" the people involved "came to me, and I was a chaplain, what would I say?" Having engaged these "human interest stories," her "sensitivity to justice and injustice is more real" and has greater depth. On a similar note, Dena had come to see "that there's way more suffering" in the world than she had ever let herself recognize before. Having been at CST, she had also gained "a more practical understanding" of how to change the world. While Beth did not say she had learned what to do, she did express an increased concern and desire to engage in social justice work:

I've become much more oriented toward social justice issues, even though I had concerns in the past and have felt a real pull toward doing more for people who have less. I've always known that there was a real dichotomy between the 'haves' and 'have nots,' but I feel it has really gotten out of hand and we as a society and as a faith community need to do something about it.

Jackie and Martha both shared that they had become more knowledgeable about the issues surrounding immigration and why people were "dying in the desert." Martha mentioned that she had sought to communicate with her faith community her new understandings "of what we're doing in other countries—we push them out and then we

attract them here." Another woman observed that her seminary readings and "the things that I have been looking at have developed a theology that I didn't know was in me. Or was emerging. Which is that, women are second class citizens. And that's a problem across the world." It is a problem that she had come to feel strongly about and wanted to address. While she wanted GLBTQ folk "to have their freedom," she also wanted to

make certain we bring women up at the same time. . . . We're out there fighting for rights, and we've dropped this ball when it comes to women. . . . Women are being mutilated, they're being killed, they're being raped . . . across the world, and we're worrying about who you having sex with.

While these midlife women were coming to a greater awareness of the suffering and injustices in the world, Nancy found some hope in a reading for her ethics class. "I can be kind of pessimistic about the world. And I guess I've sort of become a little bit of an apocalypticist," she said. But that reading gave her "some hope that maybe we're not gonna kill ourselves off this planet."

## Participants' Ways of Knowing

In his book, *In Over Our Heads*, Robert Kegan points out that "it is not enough for us to know what our students understand," educators must also be aware of "the way" students understand what they understand.<sup>73</sup> While my research questions were not oriented toward determining participants' epistemological positions, some inferences can be made based on what was shared with me. Thus, in this division, I will examine the ways of knowing that were evident among the midlife women who participated in my study.

Through a fifteen-year study of mostly male college students done during the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Kegan, 278.

1950s and 1960s, William Perry developed a theory of epistemological development that was published in 1970 in his book, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*. The nine epistemological positions that he describes in that book are commonly grouped into four categories: dualism (there is one right answer for everything), multiplicity (all opinions are equally valid), relativism (knowledge is constructed in a context, so it is not absolute), and commitment in relativism (one commits to one's own consciously chosen beliefs, while respecting others' views).

In the late 1970s, Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule began a study of women's epistemologies that was published in 1986 as *Women's Ways of Knowing (WWK)*. They conducted in-depth interviews with 135 women from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds and various contexts: recent alumnae of and current students in formal educational settings and programs sponsored by family service agencies. <sup>74</sup> From their research, they found five major epistemological categories that represented their participants' perspectives on knowing: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. In their descriptions of these categories of knowing, they made correlations between received knowing and Perry's dualism phase, subjective knowing and Perry's phase of relativism.

Beginning with the entering class of 1986, Marcia Baxter Magolda interviewed traditional-aged college students at a public university in Ohio over the course of five years in order to chart their epistemological development. Thirty-seven women and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Belenky et al., 11-12.

thirty-three men (seventy total) completed the study. <sup>75</sup> Four qualitatively different ways of knowing were observed in the students' interviews in the five-year time frame: absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing, and contextual knowing. With the exception of contextual knowing, Baxter Magolda discerned gender-related patterns of reasoning within each of these ways of knowing. A receiving pattern of absolute knowing was used more often by women, while male absolute knowers tended to use a pattern of mastering knowledge. Transitional knowers who were female were likely to take an interpersonal approach to knowing, and males usually employed an impersonal style. Female independent knowers utilized an interindividual-reasoning pattern, while an individual pattern was used more by males. Baxter Magolda writes that her "mastery-, impersonal-, and individual-reasoning patterns match Perry's (1970) descriptions of positions two, three, and four [dualism to multiplicity] relatively closely."<sup>76</sup> Likewise, her "receiving-, interpersonal-, and interindividual-reasoning patterns coincide with Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) description of women's development relatively closely."<sup>77</sup> Thus, in Baxter Magolda's model, two distinct but parallel reasoning patterns (objective/separate and narrative/connected) are brought together. Baxter Magolda goes on to observe that both patterns are needed for contextual knowing, just as constructivists in Belenky et al.'s theory integrate feeling and thinking, intuition and reason, and subjective and objective knowledge.

Baxter Magolda's model is particularly helpful for my analysis for two main

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, Knowing and Reasoning in College: Gender-Related Patterns in Students' Intellectual Development (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 401.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Baxter Magolda, 367.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Baxter Magolda, 368.

reasons: (1) It integrates two earlier, well-known theories, while distinguishing patterns of knowing from epistemological positions. (2) It describes the expectations learners at each level of knowing have of self, peers, and instructors in the educational setting and how they understand learning should be evaluated. 78 For these reasons, I will use Baxter Magolda's model as a guide for my analysis of my study participants' ways of knowing. Before continuing to this analysis, it should be noted that people's approaches to knowing may vary based on context. A woman may appear to be in one epistemological stage at school and in another in her home life. According to Ann Stanton, a developmental psychologist and educator, individuals have "unique combinations of ways of knowing" and these "may be configured differently across domains, with students responding differently (for example) to questions about knowledge in their major field versus new fields, informal learning versus classroom learning, disagreements with authorities versus disagreements with friends."<sup>79</sup> A student's epistemological abilities may not be evident when she is studying an unfamiliar subject matter. She may not be able to think independently about the subject until she has received enough knowledge and understanding to form a foundation for doing so. In addition, a "decontextualized, objective" style of knowing has been "historically favored and built into the disciplines and rituals" of higher education cultures. 80 For women who are more oriented toward connected and personalized narrative styles of learning, being in environments that favor the objective style can stifle the development of their own sense of voice and authority in

<sup>78</sup> Baxter Magolda, 29.

80 Kegan, 214.

Ann Stanton, "Reconfiguring Teaching and Knowing in the College Classroom," in Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by "Women's Ways of Knowing," ed. Nancy Rule Goldberger et al. (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 29.

creating knowledge in those contexts. Likewise, the contexts in which one has lived, worked, and studied can shape one's patterns and ways of knowing. Having observed fluidity in students' use of reasoning patterns, Baxter Magolda noted:

Because ways of knowing are socially constructed, reasoning patterns within them may change as students encounter different experiences. Some students may use "pure" versions, whereas others use a mixture of patterns. Pattern use may change over time as ways of knowing evolve.<sup>81</sup>

In my study, only two participants offered evidence of having an absolute way of knowing, and even these women seemed to have moved out of that position over the course of their seminary careers. Absolute knowers "view knowledge as certain," and they believe that authority figures, particularly instructors, hold the knowledge and "have all the answers," which it is their "task to transfer" to students. Et is the learners' role to obtain knowledge from the instructor and remember it, and then evaluation is "an opportunity to reproduce for the instructor what the student has acquired in order to see if it is correct. Peers are helpful only to the extent that they collaborate in the work of acquiring the knowledge offered by the teacher. Both of the participants who expressed an absolute way of knowing were Korean. In light of their cultural background and the fact that neither had studied in the U.S. before attending CST, this is not surprising. In Korean culture, teachers are authority figures who must be given proper deference and respect. It is the norm in Korean schools for students to be expected to merely receive information from teachers, memorize it, and then regurgitate it back on exams or papers.

In talking about her preferred teaching-learning styles, Julie expressed her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Baxter Magolda, 21-22.

<sup>82</sup> Baxter Magolda, 36, 37.

<sup>83</sup> Baxter Magolda, 37.

understanding that professors are the authorities in the classroom and that peers are not legitimate sources of knowledge:

I really enjoyed lecture. Because when I did a small group discussion, if there is a professor, I don't know, maybe that's why they're professors. Their idea is just, something. But students' discussion, it's just, you know, we're just exchanging different words.

When I asked her a clarifying question about these comments, she talked about her experiences with a particular professor's classes. Following class discussions, the professor would lecture, and "when she gives us lecture, I kind of see, wow, that it was totally wrong, what I said before." Julie was impressed that this professor did not feel the need to "correct right away" what students shared, even though "that's not right, or that's not what she thinks." She saw this as a sign of "openness" and maturity on the part of the professor. Through these comments and other evaluations of professors as teachers, Julie exhibited a transitional or independent way of knowing—she was thinking for herself and expressing her own opinions of professors' characters and teaching styles. She also acknowledged a difference between what was "right" and what the professor "thinks," that is, the professor's personal perspective.

In addition, Julie was applying what she had learned in seminary to her cultural context and to her own life. This move toward seeking to understand and apply knowledge is another characteristic of transitional knowing. Paralleling Baxter Magolda's transitional knowing with *WWK*'s subjective knowing, the conclusion can be drawn that Julie's development of a sense of her own voice, authority, and identity separate from her

roles was an additional marker of her place in this epistemological position. <sup>84</sup> Both this application of knowledge (including a questioning of former authorities) and a development of personal authority over her life are evident in the following response to my question about what had affected or initiated Julie's development of a stronger voice:

Maybe the role of women in church. That's a big issue, and I don't have any answer. But I need to think what to do or what kind of things happen when I go back to Korea. I think Korean pastors, male pastors, are very brave to say that to the congregation. . . . Say, like you know, negating women's role. Like women should be silent in church. Or not be ordained at church. And I thought that's true. This is the shocking part. Oh yeah, that's right—the Bible says, yeah, yeah, you're right, you're right. So, that's my main shifting part—of, oh, ok, I'm not, I mean I'm an actor in my life. Right, ok? You're not an actor in my life. So, it's my struggling because I can't talk, I can't freely say anything. But at Korean church, even in the United States, I shouldn't say that, so I be quiet. Because I don't want to be troublemaker. So I think that, reconsidering my life as a woman.

With her new understanding of women's place in Christian churches, Julie was wrestling with how to be faithful to her personal knowing and to her new-found voice in her patriarchal and collectivist cultural context.

In the following statements, Ruth implied that she was an absolute knower by suggesting that knowledge is about being able to recall factual data as needed:

For example, Christianity history, we learned a lot of people, people's name, and the age [date], what they had done. But I didn't have a test, so I couldn't memorize anything about even important figures. So, now, it's my last semester, but sometimes [I think], What did I learn? What can I say to the people about some important thing? But I can't tell exactly, correctly from my head.

However, in other ways, Ruth indicated she had a transitional epistemology. Transitional knowers have come to understand that uncertainty exists in some areas of knowledge.

Where there are discrepancies among authorities, they conclude that the answers are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Received knowers are defined by their roles, while in subjective knowledge, "women become their own authorities" (Belenky et al., 50, 54).

unknown in those areas.<sup>85</sup> Ruth struggled with the conflict between ideas she had been exposed to at seminary and the predominant views of her Korean Christian context, thus pointing to a way of knowing that recognized differences of beliefs:

What I learned at CST, it was quite different than what I learned in my tradition. So, it was very challenging. So, during the whole semester . . . when I write something in a paper, I was always struggling. Is this right? Where I should go? So, yeah, that was my challenge. . . . As a professor, it is ok, but in church ministry, church doesn't accept anything what I learning at CST.

The questioning, "Is this right?" and "Where should I go?" (in other words, "What stance shall I take?") demonstrates Ruth's transitional epistemological position, a position which is complicated by her location in two very different cultural and theological contexts:

CST and her church.

In transitional knowing, learners expect instructors to "employ methods that focus on understanding and application of knowledge," and interpersonal-pattern knowers "detach themselves from authority to pursue their own ideas about the uncertain areas." Ruth's solitary struggle as she wrote papers reveals this interpersonal pattern, and in the exchange represented by the following comments, she suggested that she would have liked some guidance as to how to apply seminary teachings to her context:

I can follow all of the theories at CST, but application, in the application part, it was not easy. It still is not easy. . . . I like CST's perspective—very open and liberal. Yeah, I like this kind of point of view.

Ruth was able to claim her own perspective and feelings regarding the types of teachings and culture she had encountered at CST, despite their divergence from the dominant views and mores of her own cultural faith context. This suggests she was an independent

<sup>85</sup> Baxter Magolda, 47.

<sup>86</sup> Baxter Magolda, 47, 197.

knower. Her struggle to bring her new knowledge from seminary to her congregation might even be evidence of a contextual way of knowing, in which persons acknowledge that "some knowledge claims are better than others in a particular context," and they not only expect instructors to focus on application of knowledge but to "promote application of knowledge in a context."87

Interpersonal-pattern transitional knowers in Baxter Magolda's epistemological reflection model are similar to WWK's subjective knowers. Belenky and her colleagues found that almost half of their participants were "predominantly subjectivist in their thinking."88 Many of the women in my study were probably transitional or subjective knowers as well. Transitional knowers have discovered that not all knowledge is certain; uncertainty exists in some areas. They seek to understand knowledge and expect teachers to help them gain this understanding. Thus, the purpose of evaluation is to assess students' understanding of the material. For students using an interpersonal approach, peers "provide exposure to new ideas" through sharing their personal experiences and perspectives. 89 This exposure to different perspectives opens the door to the uncertainty of knowledge and the level of independent knowing. Since interpersonal-pattern knowers are just discovering their own voices, they value professors who create a supportive atmosphere by forming relationships with students and creating class structures that allow "for self-expression and involvement." All these characteristics of transitional knowers were themes in what participants shared with me about their experiences of theological

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Baxter Magolda, 69.

Belenky et al., 55.Baxter Magolda, 114.

<sup>90</sup> Baxter Magolda, 120.

school.

Engaging in small-group discussions was a favored learning method by many of the participants in my study. They liked small groups because this format provided everyone with an opportunity to participate, and they were able to get to know their peers, which made them feel more comfortable sharing their views and experiences. Participants wanted their time in small groups to be structured around a set of discussion topics or questions. These preferences point to participants' desires to collect the ideas of others and increase their understanding of the material through conversation with their classmates. As Baxter Magolda states, for interpersonal-pattern students, "relationships are central to the learning process because knowing others promotes sharing perspectives and sharing perspectives increases knowledge."91 Yet, interpersonal knowers in Baxter Magolda's study also "held their opinions in abeyance while they collected the ideas of others, whose real or expected reactions constrained their voices." Likewise, several of my study participants talked about how they would feel out a class situation and wait and observe how a professor responded to students in order to determine if that class was a safe space in which to speak and express themselves.

Professors who connected with students and created rapport through caring about them, being open to what they shared in class, and sharing their own lives were held in high esteem by participants in my study. According to Baxter Magolda, "If instructors are uncaring, teaching (and thus learning) is ineffective" from the perspective of interpersonal-pattern knowers. These knowers like to be actively involved in the learning

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Baxter Magolda, 134.<sup>92</sup> Baxter Magolda, 155.

process and stress "learning practical material." A few women in my study expressed appreciation for professors who shared "practical information and experiences." 94 In addition, many of the participants said their favorite classes were practical theology and Bible courses, and a couple noted that they much preferred practical thinking to abstract theorizing.

Sierra indicated she was a transitional knower through several things she said. Like many of Baxter Magolda's interpersonal-pattern students, Sierra "tended to focus on the uncertain areas," although she also made comments about areas of certainty. 95 She had acquired novel understandings of the Bible from new authority figures—her Bible professors—and had "let go" of her literal approach to the text: "Now when I read the gospels I have a different lens and I'm looking at it more through different perspectives than, 'this was written by the hand of God.' Well, no, these are things that were written by people." As a result, she had come to accept that there was a great deal of uncertainty regarding the Bible and its interpretation: "Maybe Jesus really didn't say these things. These are things he could have said or these are things he could have done." She could even see the possibility of questioning Jesus' divinity. However, "truth is still universal" for her. In terms of peers, they provided Sierra with both exposure to novel perspectives and assistance with understanding course material. She had found many of her classes to be "really helpful" because both classmates and professors had exposed her "to so many different perspectives and ideas," including a variety of religious faiths. In addition, she had realized that she learned through interacting with her classmates: "I do like to engage

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> Baxter Magolda, 114.
 <sup>94</sup> This quote is from Momma G.
 <sup>95</sup> Baxter Magolda, 113.

with the text with other people. Like I said, all of a sudden somebody will say something, and like, Oh, I missed that, really? Can you elaborate on that? Tell me about that." Sierra's openness to learning from others' experiences and insights suggests an independent way of knowing, in which peers have become "a legitimate source of knowledge rather than part of the process of knowing." Sierra appreciated professors who welcomed questions, even if they were "really good at doing an interactive, engaging, interesting lecture" and had "a lot of information to give the students." In other words, Sierra appreciated instructors who encouraged student involvement and used methods that promoted understanding of the material. Like many independent knowers, Sierra emphasized openness when talking about helpful qualities in teachers, while at the same time, she reflected the desires of interpersonal-pattern transitional knowers for caring, respectful professors: "They don't treat the students in a condescending manner. They are open, really open-minded and want the students to learn. Really want them to learn."

A few women in my study expressed an impersonal pattern of transitional knowing rather than the interpersonal pattern, at least in select comments. According to Baxter Magolda, "Impersonal-pattern students want to be forced to think, prefer to exchange their views with instructors and peers via debate, expect to be challenged by instructors, value evaluation that is fair and practical, and resolve uncertainty by logic and research."97 Rachelle was one of those students who liked to be challenged and pushed beyond her comfort zone, and she wanted to be held to high standards. She did

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Baxter Magolda, 55.<sup>97</sup> Baxter Magolda, 48.

not like it when

you're really tired—you're exhausted—nevertheless, you push through, you get the paper done, you turn it on time, and a third of the class . . . doesn't bother, just doesn't bother, and nothing happens to them. Which means, of course, conversely, that nothing happened to you for getting it done.

Rachelle admitted, "I like rules; I like for them to be followed; and I like for there to be consequences when they are not followed." Thus, she would have preferred a system of grading that more fairly took into account students' promptness in handing in assignments. However, she added, "I also appreciate professors who nevertheless understand that sometimes allowances must be made for life events."

Like Rachelle, Dena wanted her thinking to be challenged, and she suggested that she would have appreciated more of a debate-style of discussion in her classes. She shared, "Yes, my perspective has been honored. It has very rarely been challenged. I think it would have been fine to have [had] it challenged more often!" She wondered "how much sharper my thinking would be on things" if she had experienced this challenging. On a similar note, she reflected on how she was "willing to guess an answer and be wrong" in class. She did not "mind looking stupid" because "when you're wrong at school, at least it's a talking point," it "advances the cause" or the process of learning. Therefore, she "saw the benefit of being wrong" occasionally, because it led to a dialogue that promoted the process of understanding. Yet, it was also important to her that the classroom be a "safe" place to "stick her neck out." While Dena "enjoyed assignments which are a little unconventional, such as projects which do not need to be entirely text-based, or do not need to be a paper," she had also found "some of the longer papers" to be "very satisfying for me," and she felt that she had "not had to do enough biblical

analysis." Dena's comments about the types of assignments she preferred imply that she may have liked doing research in order to find resolution in areas of uncertainty on her own, thus exhibiting an impersonal-pattern knowers' preference for "individual learning."

Impersonal-pattern transitional knowers also stress "understanding instead of memorizing" and they seek to master the learning process, rather than the material. <sup>99</sup>

They look to authority figures to teach them the processes for learning and then imitate the processes they learn from these authorities. Exemplifying this pattern, Ann expressed appreciation for evaluation methods that sought to measure her understanding of material, rather than her ability to memorize: "What's been good for me is that most teachers want to see that I've got it, versus objective instruments that are memorization. . . . Having the papers gives you the opportunity to synthesize, to bring it all together." In addition, Ann wanted to learn from professors their processes for engaging in graduate-level work and scholarship. Yet she wanted to gain this understanding in an interpersonal way, through informal conversations outside of class:

It's that interaction, I believe, where your real learning comes in. It's fine to teach me in that ivory tower fashion. But it's something else when I get to learn, how do you do things? How do you work it through? How do you read all these papers, and have a life? And read the books that you assigned to us? How do you make that happen? That comes from real contact. What were you thinking when you wrote that article? How did you pull together the resources? How did you find where your thesis was? What did you do? . . . What kind of a student were you? How did you succeed in graduate school? . . . These are the kind of questions that students get to ask in an informal setting that's closeness. Then you really have this dynamic learning.

Other comments Ann made indicated that she was an independent knower.

<sup>98</sup> Baxter Magolda, 134.

<sup>99</sup> Baxter Magolda, 126.

Independent knowers have come to the understanding that knowledge is uncertain and therefore, it is a matter of personal perspective. The development of individual voice is facilitated by the belief that there are no wrong perspectives. Since knowledge is "open to many interpretations," independent knowers emphasize being "open" and "receptive to others' ideas." 100 Now that they have a sense of being "free to think for themselves" and they perceive their views as equal to others', independent knowers expect professors to be open to students' thoughts and to encourage the exchange of varying views. 101 Ann criticized some professors' lack of authentic openness to theological diversity in the classroom. For her, "Real diversity happens when people do and don't agree, and they're willing to engage in meaningful conversation and dialog and grow from it." She wanted to see professors "really work through being open to [the] various experiences" and perspectives that students brought to issues discussed in class. Ann appreciated those professors who were receptive to students' perspectives and utilized "everyone in the classroom" to inform discussions, including herself. In these remarks, Ann revealed an interindividual pattern of individual knowing. Interindividual-pattern knowers tend to work hard "to include their own voices as equal to those of peers and authority," while maintaining an "intense openness to others' opinions." The interaction of others' interpretations with their own help them form their own viewpoints. <sup>103</sup> In addition, interindividual-pattern learners in Baxter Magolda's study either "expected others to accept their views" or no longer cared how others would react or what they would think

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<sup>100</sup> Baxter Magolda, 146.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> Baxter Magolda, 146, 165, 152.

<sup>102</sup> Baxter Magolda, 195.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> Baxter Magolda, 147.

about them. <sup>104</sup> Ann expressed this way of thinking when she said, "I'm gonna say what I think. And I don't necessarily feel bad if you don't agree with me. Because I believe other people have other views and values." A few other women in my study also shared that they were not hesitant to share their thoughts in class, thus indicating their position as independent knowers.

According to Baxter Magolda, independent knowers believe everyone's voice is valid and do not desire to change others' views, while they recognize that they may modify their own views. <sup>105</sup> Although independent knowers make their own decisions about what to believe, they are usually unable to identify criteria upon which to base such decisions. <sup>106</sup> A few of the women I interviewed talked about how much they had appreciated hearing a variety of perspectives and cultural experiences at seminary and that they had expanded their own views and thinking as a result. They went beyond collecting the views of others to engaging others as sources of knowledge, but they did not express their reasoning for changing their understandings and views.

Individual-pattern knowers in Baxter Magolda's study focused on their own thinking, which dominated when there were differences of opinion, so they "sometimes had to struggle to listen carefully to other voices." Similarly, Pauline did not have difficulty speaking up in class, but she had decided to work on listening to others. She knew her own views, and, at the same time, she recognized that other views needed to be honored:

<sup>104</sup> Baxter Magolda, 155.

<sup>105</sup> Baxter Magolda, 195.

<sup>106</sup> Baxter Magolda, 146.

<sup>107</sup> Baxter Magolda, 156.

I think a lot of times I have a sense or rightness that I want to steer away from. I think that listening broadens that respect for other people. And when you really hear you really do grow. I find myself not raising my hand as much as I'd like normally. Wanting to really hear.

Independent knowers appreciate instructors who promote independent thinking. Individual-pattern learners in particular prefer teachers who allow them "to make sense of things in their own way or to define their own learning goals." Pauline shared, "I think test taking, even at the graduate level, it feels too much like I am pleasing somebody else. And I like direction and when you have a topic in writing that you can apply your own thoughts to it." While Pauline wanted to be able to express her own ideas in assignments, her desire for a given topic and direction to her papers indicates that she had not fully moved away from looking to authority figures "as leaders in the process of learning," unlike Baxter Magolda's individual-pattern learners. Anne, however, enjoyed being given the freedom to explore her own interests in writing assignments—the less restrictions the better. She loved doing research and appreciated being allowed to integrate theology with biblical exeges is and pull her background in psychology into her work on spirituality and spiritual formation. Anne's focus on integrating knowledge from different fields suggests that she may have been a contextual knower. For contextual knowers in Baxter Magolda's study, "Knowledge from one course alone was insufficient and needed to be related to other strands of knowledge in order to be useful."109

Contextual knowers recognize that, while knowledge is uncertain, "some knowledge claims are better than others in a particular context." Thus, one must

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> Baxter Magolda, 160.

<sup>109</sup> Baxter Magolda, 178.

<sup>110</sup> Baxter Magolda, 69.

construct one's perspectives carefully. While independent knowing operates "completely independent of existing knowledge and context," contextual knowing relies on both to make judgments about what to believe. <sup>111</sup> In contextual knowing, it is necessary to examine and evaluate existing knowledge, weigh "the particularities of the context," and then work with these to develop one's personal viewpoint. <sup>112</sup> The contextual learner understands her role as "thinking through problems and integrating and applying knowledge in context." <sup>113</sup> She also recognizes that she must support her views with evidence.

Jane shared her shift from an independent way of knowing to contextual knowing as she discussed and reflected on a classroom experience in which one of the professors of her World Religions in Dialogue class called her a "relativist." When people in the class "started having problems" with her perspective that "everybody else" besides Christianity could "be right," she felt a need to justify and explain the reasons for her views. Her perspective revealed an understanding that knowledge is contextual:

I can't judge the women who have killed their children, because I've had children that I've had to walk out of the room when they're six months old and I want to throw them out a window because they won't stop crying. The only difference between them and me is that I walked out of the room. They couldn't, they didn't, they wouldn't. And people started having trouble with that. "Well, what about," you know, "Do you think every country should be a democracy?" Well, no I don't... That's an arrogant thought to think that everyone else should be exactly how we are. They were having trouble with that. But it made me start trying to form how I allow others [to be where they are]... Like I have a sister who's making some interesting choices right now, and it's like, I don't agree with her. And when it falls down around her, I'm not going to really feel sorry for her, because she's 60 years old, ... Although that doesn't mean I won't be there for her.

<sup>111</sup> Baxter Magolda, 188.

Baxter Magolda, 188.

<sup>113</sup> Baxter Magolda, 69.

Seminary was helping Jane move out of a decontextualized relativism, where "everything goes," into an understanding that context influences actions and beliefs and that some actions can be judged to be wrong, even if they are understandable: 114

Before, I bought what everybody else bought, and I would say, "Well, you know, Buddhists are fine and Muslims are fine, because it's all the road to the same place." It isn't. A Buddhist road is different, and it's going to a different place, but, that's perfect for them. My daughter was unchurched. She didn't grow up with a Christian overlay the way I did. For her to be Buddhist would work for her. I can't, because I can't let go of, there's a God for me. But she never had that. So, it's causing me to be more allowing of where people are. What they've done. Not that I would say abuse is good, but I can understand now some abuses that take place, how it comes out of their upbringing. That doesn't make it right. . . . So it's helping me to understand that everybody has their context. . . . It's allowing for that.

Baxter Magolda states, "Contextual knowers substantiate the views that they espouse by using the supporting arguments that led them to construct those opinions. They situate their perspectives in particular contexts and do not transfer ideas to new situations without reevaluating their validity."115 We can hear Jane doing this, yet she was not satisfied with her arguments. At CST, she was "taking apart and putting together" ideas and developing her own beliefs and theology, but

... I can't defend it yet. Because I can't defend it with what the Bible says and what I feel to be correct, not true, but correct. But it's growing, Hopefully someday, it'll be a mature way of expressing it. Well, when I'm ordained, because I'm going to have to defend it.

In these and other sections of her interview, Jane also revealed what WWK calls "constructed knowledge," which has a lot in common with Baxter Magolda's contextual knowing. Constructivists understand that "truth is a matter of the context in which it is

Baxter Magolda, 170.Baxter Magolda, 188.

embedded."<sup>116</sup> They integrate feeling and thinking, intuition and reason, and subjective and objective knowledge. They are "articulate and reflective," and they concern themselves with "issues of inclusion and exclusion, separation and connection."<sup>117</sup> In other words, women who think as constructivists use "connected 'passionate' knowing as the predominant mode for understanding"; they are instruments of knowing who weave "their passions and intellectual life into some recognizable whole."<sup>118</sup> When faced with a moral dilemma, constructivists are sensitive to the situation and context and "resist premature generalizations" about what is right or what should be done. <sup>119</sup> Rather than focusing on what would be just in an abstract sense, they insist on considering everyone's needs.

In addition, constructivists have "a high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity." Nancy expressed a sense of paradox and contradiction between her developing academic understandings of the "historical Jesus" and her lived experience of the "religious Jesus." She recognized this same paradox existed within her in relation to the Eucharist:

I do have an intense experience of Eucharist also. And I try not to intellectualize that. I try just to go to the rail and pray. It's a weird custom. Body and blood. Being body and blood. It's like, yeah, I try not to intellectualize it, 'cause it's weird.

Nancy's reflectivity on these paradoxes between intellectual understandings and faith experiences is characteristic of constructivists.

<sup>116</sup> Belenky et al., 138.

<sup>117</sup> Belenky et al., 133.

<sup>118</sup> Belenky et al., 141.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>119</sup> Belenky et al., 149.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>120</sup> Belenky et al., 137.

The contextual way of knowing is complex and therefore more difficult to identify in the data I collected than the other epistemological positions. For example, many of the women commented on the knowledge of their professors and said they found knowledge about their subject matter to be one of the most helpful qualities in a teacher. At first glance, these comments gave the impression that the women were absolute or received knowers who just wanted to soak up the knowledge their professors bestowed on them. However, as people move into contextual knowing, authority figures are no longer seen as "all-knowing" or granted automatic authority; authority "is conferred only on those who have demonstrated expertise" in a particular context or area of knowledge. 121 Contextual knowers are their own authorities, yet those whom they have granted expert status "are more influential than authorities were in independent knowing."122 In other words, contextual knowers give a lot of attention and credence to those they consider experts in the field or context under consideration. This may be what several women in my study were doing, thus suggesting that they had developed a contextual way of knowing.

My limited data also makes it difficult to distinguish between participants in transitional knowing who "appreciated the ability to engage actively with the material that they were studying and to apply learning to real life" and those in contextual knowing who "aimed at thinking through knowledge claims and integrating information in order to apply it within a context." <sup>123</sup> For example, Momma G wrote that she "enjoyed designing 'practice' classes and studies." Such exercises involve applying knowledge to

<sup>121</sup> Baxter Magolda, 193, 198.

<sup>122</sup> Baxter Magolda, 198. 123 Baxter Magolda, 110, 176-77.

plan lessons that might be used in real-life contexts. They could be engaged and enjoyed by a transitional or contextual knower. However, Momma G indicated that, as a seminary student, she had gained the ability to explain and support theological beliefs that were previously subjectively held:

But, to me, the resurrection is where the Christ comes in, and that's where the salvation is in, is that, resurrection is the promise. And I had never, I had no language for that thought until I had been here at school.

In these two sentences and the explication leading up to them, as well as her discussion of how she had developed her concept of the Trinity and her Christology, Momma G revealed that she had considered various theological perspectives before arriving at her own perspective. Her efforts to support and justify her perspective suggest that she was beginning to enter into contextual knowing.

For Baxter Magolda's contextual knowers, "knowledge out of context was less useful than knowledge applied to a particular context." The Unitarian Universalist participant in my study seemed to be constantly seeking to apply what she was learning at CST to her UU context in order to make it meaningful and useful. Since Unitarian Universalists would probably not find value in using the spiritual practice of *lectio divina* with biblical texts, she contemplated, "What would I do for Unitarians to find meaning in *lectio divina*? What would work?" Like Jane, she recognized the influence of context on people's beliefs. Commenting on traditional Christian beliefs, she said, "A lot of it was bunk. . . . I guess you need to be steeped in it in order to believe it, and so I can't judge people for having these beliefs now." Graciously, she looked for how learning conservative Christian views could be helpful to her:

<sup>124</sup> Baxter Magolda, 178.

These lessons are good—because it really is going to teach me how I'm going to be, how am I going to relate to other clergy once I am in a church or doing some kind of social justice ministry. Because I will have to work with other people with different belief systems, or they're coming to these answers from different ways, so, there's, try to be a way to respect how they believe and to work with them. But at least know that's where that's coming from. Or at least so that I don't take offense, . . . that's what I worry about more than anything, is like judgment on the other side for not believing.

Contextual knowers consider the ideas of others more carefully than those in less developed ways of knowing, and valid views have to be integrated into their own perspectives. <sup>125</sup> This weighing of different views was evident in the UU participant's reflections on whether or not she could call herself a "Christian." These reflections were sparked by a classroom discussion of the Christological continuum. She began,

It was interesting to see that then, the conservative Christians really didn't allow very much before they didn't consider these persons to be Christian at all. So, the other thing is, that I'm trying to figure out, is, having been brought up with a low Christology, what does that mean? Do I take their word that I'm not a Christian?

She had "a good deal of respect for Jesus' teachings," had grown up Christian, and still found "important lessons" in various biblical passages, so she figured she still had a place on the continuum, and "I guess I am still a Christian." She would have liked to "throw out" her Christianity and call herself a Buddhist, but because of her cultural context and background, she knew she could not do that.

## Summary

Most of the midlife women who participated in this research project were engaging in theological studies with the expressed goals of becoming pastors, chaplains, or better religious educators. They desired to learn that which would contribute to their work in these roles. Most of the participants, whether consciously or not, were also open

<sup>125</sup> Baxter Magolda, 188.

to growing as persons and developing their own thinking and spiritual or religious understandings. This was evident in that none of the participants said they had not experienced any changes in their own sense of self and spirituality or theological beliefs and perspectives.

Since midlife women come to theological school with a desire to learn, they expect their professors to be knowledgeable and well-versed in their fields. Yet, they also want to know how academic material applies to people's lives and the work of ministry, so they appreciate instructors who are able to make these kinds of connections.

Connecting with students is likewise important: participants in this study were attentive to whether professors were open to hearing students' questions and ideas, whether they cared about and had compassion for students and their lives, and whether they shared their own selves and experiences with students. At the same time, many of the women had worked in professional and business settings, so they expected teachers to be not only knowledgeable, but competent in their work as educators. They valued professors who were good at creating and maintaining structure for their courses, managing classroom discussions, expressing clear and realistic expectations, and evaluating based on those expectations.

In terms of teaching-learning styles, most of the participants preferred lecture, discussion, or a combination of the two. Many of them also liked to have practical, hands-on experiences and visual or multimedia presentations in their classes. Lectures were a way to obtain the expert knowledge and perspectives of professors as well as clarification of reading assignments. Through discussions, midlife women were able to

learn from other students and verbally work through their own thinking. Several of the participants mentioned that they had appreciated learning about diverse perspectives and expressions of faith, and much of this learning had come through interactions with other students. However, they did not like it when a few students were allowed to dominate classroom conversations, so they preferred small group discussions in which it was easier for everyone to participate. Several of the women spoke of being hesitant to express themselves in a class until they knew it was a safe environment, that is, one in which the professor encouraged students' comments and questions, genuinely listened, and responded supportively and one in which they would not be denigrated or shamed by the professor or other students. A sense of comfort and familiarity with the material was also essential before many participants were willing to speak up. A few women shared that they had no trouble talking in class. In general, participants felt that their classroom contributions were heard, honored, and valued.

Practical theology and Bible courses were commonly named as the most helpful and meaningful courses. They were the courses that were the most evidently useful for the ministerial work in which the women planned to engage. Spiritual formation courses in particular contributed to personal growth and renewal. Introductory theology, Christian history, and ethics courses were often challenging to the point of being overwhelming because of the new vocabulary and ways of thinking participants needed to learn and the amount of reading and writing they were assigned to do. Several women expressed the desire to have more time to reflect on, process, and synthesize material. Writing helped them to do this, and most of the participants preferred writing assignments to taking tests.

Tests seemed to be about regurgitating information and giving professors what they wanted. Writing papers challenged participants to engage in critical reflection and analysis of course topics and material, and they provided opportunities to explore ideas and systematize thinking. Some women preferred short papers or reflection papers, while others liked to do research and exegesis.

Most of the examples of bias or prejudice that participants shared with me were one-time experiences or were limited to the actions or statements of one person.

Expressions of sexism, ageism, racism, or heterosexism were more likely to come from students or staff members than professors. However, a few students felt that some professors exhibited a bias against M.Div. students by focusing on doctoral students and master's degree students who were headed toward doctoral programs. The prevalent forms of bias that were noted were biases against conservative Christians and commuters. There was a culture of liberalism at CST that was often experienced as oppressive or marginalizing for people who did not accord with the assumed liberal norms. Commuters named various ways that institutional structures better served students who lived close to or on campus and made it difficult for midlife commuters to feel a part of the seminary community and meet school requirements. Midlife women seminarians usually have several globes they are juggling, including family, work, church, and school. They struggle to balance their various activities while pushing their midlife brains and bodies to their limits, even as their bodies are tiring and their brains are naturally slowing down.

While Bible courses were frequently named as favorites, they also challenged some women's assumptions about the Bible and their Christologies. For at least a couple

participants, theology and Bible courses led them to distinguish between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. In addition, biblical studies contributed to new approaches to biblical texts and novel spiritual understandings. Theology courses developed, modified, and strengthened personal theologies and helped participants think more systematically about their faith. Through Christian history and theology courses, a few participants gained an increased appreciation for the faith traditions in which they had grown up and in which they were currently involved. While a few women felt their studies had separated them from their spiritualities, several expressed that they had become more grounded, centered, and spiritually in tune and aware. Many participants shared that they had grown more confident and strong as a result of attending theological school. They were more aware of their strengths and had a greater sense of their own voices and worth. As seminarians, several women had found affirmations of their ways of thinking and believing and their callings, purposes, gifts, and abilities.

It was difficult to determine the epistemological location of my participants due to the limitations of the data I collected, but my analysis indicates that most did not come to theological school as absolute knowers. The majority were transitional (subjective) or independent knowers, while a few may have been contextual knowers. In other words, they did not believe that the nature of knowledge is absolute and certain, and they did not view their professors as ultimate authorities. They sought to think for themselves, and they were open to learning from their peers. Most of the participants wanted to be evaluated based on their understanding of the material and their ability to think critically about it.

For some participants, theological studies moved them into or more fully into relativistic and contextual understandings, which revealed a development in their epistemologies. Relativism was expressed in statements that essentially said, "Your theology/faith/spirituality is ok and right for you, and mine is right for me." A contextual perspective was evident in comments that recognized, "I believe, act, feel, or relate to the Sacred in this way because of my context and particular set of experiences and the same is true for you." These shifts in understanding and perspective were tied to many women's increased acceptance of and respect for people with diverse beliefs, religious traditions, cultures, theological perspectives, and sexual orientations. Seminary helped many participants become more open-minded, less judgmental, and more empathic and compassionate. Some became more conscious of and sensitive to injustices and suffering in the world, while others gained an increased awareness of Christianity's imperialism and injustices done in the "name of God" throughout Christian history.

Through all the struggles of attending theological school and the changes they had experienced, most of the participants had a positive perspective and were grateful for the opportunity to study, learn, and grow. In Chapter 7, suggestions for theological education based on research participants' experiences of CST and ETSC will be offered.

#### **CHAPTER 7**

#### Conclusions

Midlife women come to theological school from a variety of educational, work, ethnic, and family backgrounds. Most of the women in my study had degrees in the social sciences or humanities. Their work histories were more varied and difficult to categorize. While several had held a variety of jobs, a few had experienced many years in one occupation. However, since most had worked in business or professional contexts at some point in their lives, they expected the professors and staff of their theological schools to exercise a high level of professionalism and expertise in their fields.

Paralleling the data for entering theological school students at ATS schools in 2009, two-thirds of my research participants were white. The majority were married or in committed partner relationships, and most of them had children. Their lives were busy with work, family, and volunteer activities in addition to school. Despite the stresses of juggling so many things, building relationships at school—particularly with other midlife women—and maintaining meaningful relationships outside of school were important in these midlife women seminarians' lives.

This chapter reviews the themes in midlife women's journeys to and through theological school and explores implications of this information for religious professionals, theological schools, and professors. The importance of relationality and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Non-international white students constituted 68.5% of all 2009 entering ATS theological school students, according to the Association of Theological Schools, "Table 2: Enrollment by Racial/Ethnic Identity and Citizenship" in "Student Information Project."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In my study, 57% of the women were married or in domestic partner relationships. In comparison, about 54% of 36- to 55-year-old women entering theological school master's degree programs in 2009 were married (Association of Theological Schools, "Table 3" in "Student Information Project").

connection and expectations for professionalism and competence are elements that appear within these themes.

## Why Some Midlife Women Decide to Attend Seminary

Examining participants' stories of why they decided to attend theological school, I discerned four main themes that summed up the reasons for this decision: the women felt they had been called to seminary and ministry; they were pursuing their heart's desire; they were seeking to do something different and more meaningful; and the time was right to make this move in their lives. Analyzing these themes and the women's narratives, I determined that the decision to attend theological school in midlife is frequently connected with developmental or psychological characteristics of midlife. The midlife women in my study shared many characteristics with midlife women studied by others. While several of my participants' narratives evidenced more than one theme, the majority of them felt that the main reason why they were at seminary was because they had been divinely called. For some, that call had come to them earlier in their lives—maybe simply in the form of a desire—but it was only in their midlife years that they felt free to embark on the journey of theological education. Others seemed to be claiming their gifts and passions and seeking paths in which they could utilize those in personally meaningful ways. Most of the participants came to seminary with the goal of beginning careers as ordained congregational ministers or chaplains. Thus, they were particularly interested in biblical studies, pastoral/spiritual care, preaching, worship, spiritual formation, and theology. Several expressed a desire to gain knowledge, theological understanding, and ministerial skills, and some talked about wanting to make a difference in the world

through ministries of healing and social justice.

# Implications for Religious Professionals

For many of the participants in this study, church members, pastors, and other religious professionals played key roles in the process of deciding to go to seminary. While friends and associates from church often provided affirmation of gifts and encouragement to pursue theological education, ministers offered specialized assistance to women in discerning the directions that were right for them and whether they had a call to ordained ministry or not. Therefore, religious professionals ought to be aware of the role they can play in midlife women's discernment processes and conscientious about the guidance they provide.

There are many midlife women in faith communities who will not find themselves inclined or called to pursue theological education, yet they may also share some of the desires, needs, and ambitions that the women in my study had. Thus, my research participants' experiences point to practices that may be helpful to midlife women in congregations. Many of the women in my research group had been involved with their churches for many years, and one of the attractions of seminary for them was the opportunity to gain academic and practical knowledge that they were not getting in their faith communities or felt they could not gain from personal study. Some participants particularly sought to learn more about the Bible and to develop their own theological understandings. This suggests that midlife women would like ministers to bring the resources of their theological educations to their congregations and share what they have learned with them. They would like to learn about the formation of the biblical canon.

how to approach the Bible critically, and how to interpret it in its historical-cultural context. Such study can be meaningful and spiritually enlightening. It can also prepare a person for what she might encounter should she decide to attend theological school. In addition, midlife adults desire and need continuing guidance in the formation of their theologies. Developmentally, they are at a place where they are ready and want to explore different belief systems and ways of experiencing the Sacred. This is a good time to go beyond what was taught in adolescent confirmation classes and explore the theological roots of one's faith. Such studies might be supplemented with explorations into contemporary and emerging theologies and how to respond theologically to various life events and social issues.

Along with the desire for academic knowledge, several of the women in my study were seeking leadership skill development in terms of preaching, worship, religious education, and pastoral/spiritual care. Courses in such areas are often provided by denominational structures beyond the congregational level—if they are not, this would be a good idea—but local ministers can be helpful by providing mentoring and opportunities to practice such skills or by directing women to ways they can serve outside the congregation and engage in social justice work. Many women in midlife experience a strong desire to make a difference in their congregations, communities, and world.

The desires for academic learning and practical knowledge I discovered among

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> People in Stage 5 ("conjunctive faith") of James Fowler's faith development theory are "alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions"; they are vulnerable "to the strange truths of those who are 'other"; and they are "ready for closeness to that which is different and threatening to self and outlook." It is unusual for someone to reach this stage before midlife. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981), 198.

my participants may have been expressions of a greater desire for personal growth, development, and exploration. Midlife women often seek opportunities to learn more about themselves and to develop the talents and gifts they find within themselves. Teaching different spiritual practices or forming spiritual growth and support groups can be very meaningful and helpful to people in midlife as they seek to grow and develop or as they struggle with various midlife issues and challenges. Shellenbarger observed that many midlife women in her study "turned to spirituality for emotional support or guidance in decision making. . . . Some women who did not report some spiritual dimension to their midlife crises said they yearned for it."<sup>4</sup> Practices such as journaling, meditation, and contemplation can facilitate the processing and working through of midlife struggles. Doing dreamwork, individually or in a group, is particularly apropos at this time of life. Dreams reveal what is going on in the active unconscious, and since they are close to consciousness, paying attention to them can bring to light things that need to be (or that the Self wants to be) addressed by the conscious person. Robert Johnson's book, Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth, provides guidance on how to engage in dreamwork and active imagination (a Jungian practice) by oneself, while Jeremy Taylor's two books, Dream Work: Techniques for Discovering the Creative Power in Dreams and Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill: Using Dreams to Tap the Wisdom of the Unconscious, are excellent resources for running dreamwork groups. Engaging in creative activities can likewise access unconscious and neglected parts of the self, so encouraging midlife women to take up a new hobby or return to one that has been forgotten can be helpful as well.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Shellenbarger, 169.

Midlife can be a lonely time. Shellenbarger observed, "Most women feel more isolated at this stage. Nearly every woman in my study believed she was alone in her midlife turmoil, despite abundant evidence to the contrary." Forming groups that bring together women who are middle-aged or older can create the conditions for reducing this sense of aloneness. Midlife women need communal support from other women their age and women who know what they are going through and can provide the perspective and wisdom that comes from having been there. Small group gatherings that focus on storytelling are one method for reducing feelings of isolation, while at the same time, telling and retelling one's story is a way to process one's life experiences and create meaningful understandings and interpretations of them. In addition, Shellenbarger points to the wisdom that can be shared through stories:

Storytelling is uniquely suited to passing on the wisdom gleaned from midlife crisis. It allows us to communicate unspoken knowledge that might otherwise be difficult to pass on. Because we can convey emotion in our stories, we can also transmit layers of meaning beyond our words. And storytelling affords living examples of how to handle a challenge, showing others, rather than telling them, how to live.<sup>6</sup>

Another idea would be to create groups focused around creative activities, such as quilting or painting. Such groups not only provide an opportunity for women to share with one another, but they are an outlet for the creative energies that commonly arise in midlife.

In sum, ministers and churches can be crucial resources to women as they journey through midlife. Pastors in particular ought to be prepared for middle-aged women coming to them for assistance and guidance as they go through this time of transition, of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Shellenbarger, 196.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Shellenbarger, 197.

not-knowing, and of searching for meaning. They can be attentive to when women are entering the waters of midlife and provide resources for them to not only safely traverse these waters, but to do so in a meaningful and enlivening way.

## Midlife Women's Experiences of Theological School

Most midlife women come to theological school highly motivated and eager to learn. Even in the midst of struggles and frustrations with particular aspects of their seminary experience, my research participants looked for the positive and emphasized what they had gained from their educations. In addition, I asked them to name what stood out for them in their experiences at CST or ETSC, what was most meaningful or empowering, or what were highlights for them. These questions asked the participants to look at their experiences of theological school as a whole. Thus, their responses to these questions may offer the best insights into what the theological school experience means for a midlife woman.

#### Highlights of the Theological School Experience

For this section, I have drawn mainly from participants' responses to the following questions: "What stands out for you in your experience at CST? What has been most meaningful for you? What has been most empowering?" "Are there other things you would like to share about your experience as a student at CST, such as disappointments, struggles, achievements, highlights?" I have divided participants' responses to these questions, as well as some general comments made in other parts of the interviews, into five main thematic categories: growth and learning; people and relationships; spiritual life; affirmations and hospitality; and appreciation.

Growth and learning. Several of the participants expressed appreciation for all they had learned and the ways their thinking and ability to express themselves had developed in their time as seminary students. Rachelle expressed a basic precept of liberative pedagogy when she wrote, "Having more knowledge is empowering; having greater understanding is empowering." For some of the women, a blessing of theological school was that they gained theological integration and, in Pauline's words, it "matured what a lot of what my thinking was and clarified it for me." Julie found her voice and grew in her ability to express herself in academic English writing: "I feel a lot better writing English. . . . I can write a paper now, even if there are tons and tons of grammatical errors, but I can write. I can start. Before, I couldn't start."

Interactions with other students and diverse texts at seminary contributed to intellectual and personal growth. Ruth was grateful that she had been exposed to various perspectives and points of view at CST. For Natalie, differences helped her develop her own thinking:

I have loved all the classes I've taken because of the amount I've learned about myself as well as the subject matter. The most meaningful part is meeting the professors and students, all of whom have very different backgrounds but have struggled with many of the same religious issues that I struggle with. Through our discussions, I've learned to express my faith more clearly.

The diversity at CST helped Dena realize "the uniqueness of all people in the classrooms." She came to value her own differentness because "everybody else is different, too." At the same time, she learned to see "the strengths of different people, including myself." Similarly, Suzanne wrote,

It is empowering to realize that though my life experiences have been unique, so have others lived their own unique lives, and that it is ok to be different. This

comes from the pluralistic and accepting perspective that is a part of CST's outlook.

Learning and growing are processes where one thing builds on another. Jackie explained the way this process worked for her and many others at seminary:

At first, you're taking stuff in, like everything's new. I never heard of that, I don't know who that person is, I don't know what happened in that year. . . . And then you start hearing things again. And you start connecting things after a couple of years. . . . And it's that kind of thing where you have enough in your basket to actually make something. You get all these separate ingredients and you have no idea how they go together. Pretty soon you start to see the recipe. Oh, I get this. By the time I was done . . . I have something worthwhile. I have something beautiful. And I'm confident in using it and I'm excited to go out and make something with these ingredients.

Rachelle talked about the meaningfulness of being able to observe her own process of growth and change intellectually and spirituality: "The transformation—and there has been a transformation, I do sort of recognize it, even though, it was always me, so it's hard to see the transformation the way other people do—but that is empowering." Like Jackie, after several years of seminary, she felt confident that she was ready "to get to that next stage" of working as the pastor of a church.

People and relationships. As already noted, Dena found the diversity of students at CST meaningful. She appreciated the age range of her fellow students and felt it was important to have younger people's idealism as well as older people's experience and wisdom present in the classroom. Kathleen shared similar sentiments:

I'm really glad to see that there's women that are coming back to school that are more mature; they've been through a lot . . . I love the young graduate students—I just love 'em to pieces. I mean, they're fun. . . . And so, then to have all these other women who have been there before—it's really nice that this school is able to attract both. So we're not so alone . . . . I can have, be able to bond with these two different groups. Just, I really am glad that they're there.

Dena also noted the significance for her of "having the experience of meeting non-Christian students or foreign students and learning to share a space with them." On a related note, Martha shared,

One thing that's been surprising to me, not that I thought about it ahead of time, like, oh, this'll be hard, but, just the vast array of relationships that I've developed with so many different people. People from all over the world. People who are young, people who are old, professors, staff. I mean, it's a very small community, but, it's a very diverse community. And that has been great.

Likewise, Altheia wrote, "I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know the students in my classes and my professors."

Other participants also shared the meaningfulness of developing relationships with fellow students. When I asked Devorah, "What stands out for you in your experience here?" she replied, "The amazing, wonderful people that I've met. That's number one. Just really cultivating meaningful relationships that I didn't think was going to happen and was possible." Nancy's response to the same question was, "My wonderful classmates—it's incredible to be around people who are motivated by call over ego." This was something that she had not seen "in the corporate world." Rachelle specifically spoke of the significance of developing relationships with people whom she felt she would be able to call upon in the future to remind her of who she was:

There's going to be folks that you can go back to throughout the rest of your career. At those times when you're blurring those lines, . . . they're going to be there to say, "Here's who you are. You're that crazy person who does such and such, remember?"

In sum, experiencing diversity in the classroom and developing relationships with various people at seminary were two things that stood out in my participants' experiences of theological school.

Spiritual life. Two women in my study talked about spiritual dimensions as particularly meaningful in their seminary experiences. After less than one year of theological school, what stood out as meaningful for Jane was her spiritual life:

the things that are happening under the surface. . . . it's something you can't explain; it's something nobody explains to you, and yet when it happens, it's like that filled with the Holy Spirit, out of nowhere! That was amazing. And I've had things happen, maybe not to that degree, but it's like, the Spirit's presence is here. It is here. And I don't know if for everybody, and it's not my call, but for me, it's here. And that's unique.

Beth shared that she found her experience with the Episcopal Theological School at Claremont to be "especially meaningful," because,

They combine the educational part of the teaching weekends with a spiritual component, offering worship before classes begin on Friday evenings and Eucharist during the day on Saturdays. I like being able to participate in the worship services, both actively and passively.

Most of the research participants, however, did not experience this integration of the academic with the spiritual at theological school. While they may have experienced what they considered positive changes in their spiritualities, these changes were disruptive of what had been comfortable and comforting for them. Lack of integration and disruption of a central part of their way of being are likely reasons why other women did not mention spiritual dimensions as highlights of their seminary experience.

Affirmations and hospitality. For three participants, the respect and hospitality they experienced at CST and ETSC were especially meaningful. Ruth was touched by how respectful people at CST were toward minorities. Beth noted that "ETSC was especially accommodating and hospitable; they really embraced me and my fellow United Methodist students as one of their own." She also appreciated "the respect they

give to their students." Likewise, professors' respect for her and other students made a significant impact on Jackie. She shared, "They were respecting us more than I even knew. . . . I didn't think of myself as a leader when I got here, but I think we were treated as religious leaders in the making and some already made." In addition, she felt a strong sense of affirmation when Dr. Roland Faber made a lot of positive comments on a paper she wrote for him, "and then at the end he said, 'You really should study process more.'

Wow, Roland Faber said I should study process! If I had any electives, I might."

Like Jackie, it was meaningful to Suzanne to have "professors and fellow students affirm my abilities, my gifts, and my awareness." Nancy found it empowering just to get through the first year and to know "that at my age, I can do this and excel." For Momma G and Ray, it was meaningful to know that they were doing what they were meant to do. Ray shared that this made a difference in how she approached her studies:

Knowing that I am on the right path and knowing how responsive I am to learning the things that lead me to where I want, to where God is calling me, I go into those classes with a different attitude. It's not like, let's just get done with this. How do I get more? . . . . A whole different level of interests. And so, the confirmation, the affirmation that my interests and my studies link so good. 'Cause this is an expensive project."

Momma G not only experienced an affirmation of her call as a seminary student, but she felt affirmed even before she began her coursework that she was not alone in her religious experience and thinking:

Every day at CST has been an affirmation to me that I am doing what God has called me to do. When I was accepted, we were sent Ellen Marshall's book about peace-making. Reading that book the summer before school started made me weep. There were other people in the world who believed the same things I did and felt the same way about the world! I did not have this sense of affirmation at

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ellen Ott Marshall, ed., *Choosing Peace through Daily Practices* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005).

work or church.

These short quotes point to the impact that being treated respectfully and receiving affirmation of one's abilities and gifts can have on midlife women, even women who appear confident and strong on the outside. Notably, it was not always external affirmations that were the most meaningful. Realizing one's own competence and coming to a sense of confirmation of one's call on one's own were what was most significant for some participants.

Appreciation. Several of the participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to study at this time in their lives, for their professors, and for the education they had received. A couple wished they could have given back and invested as much as they were offered. When asked to share disappointments, Kathleen said, "I think, more than anything, I'm disappointed in myself. What I mean by that is, I really want a do better for the professors. . . . I really want to give them as much as I feel like I've gotten." Julie wished she could have taken less classes at a time, so she could have enjoyed her studies. Then she could have done better and done more.

Three of the participants expressed issues they had with academia and academic life at CST, but at the same time, they emphasized the positive. Nancy shared,

I could rant and rave about academia, but, for the most part, this is really, I consider it a very, very special, very, very special, time. And I consider myself very lucky to be sitting in this nice school and living in my home and somehow be able to afford the gas to go back and forth. It's a little bubble.

Similarly, Devorah said,

As much as I complain about the academics here, I have just really appreciated the professors I have had and what they have shown to me. And what I feel like I'm coming away with. It really has been mind-blowing in many ways.

In addition, she felt privileged to have

the opportunity to take a class with Rosemary Radford Ruther—what an opportunity. What a blessing. Because I had been reading some of her stuff. . . . Here's this famous theologian. And I get to take a class with her? Wow!

Ray was amazed at "the years people have spent studying the concepts and theories about mysteries that don't have answers. That just blows my mind. Completely blows my mind, because I think God is only going to let us get so close." While she had respect for the work scholars did, she also wondered, "if that level of intelligence is locked up, how does it breathe forward?" In other words, "Where's the service?" Reflecting more, she realized that there needed to be some people to teach others who would then take what they learned into the world: "So it's sort of what came first, the chicken or the egg thing. And I've thought about that more here than ever before in my life."

Both Devorah and CJ had done graduate work in education, and they both spoke of how much more difficult and rigorous theological school was. Devorah commented, "This is the hardest educational program I have ever pursued, bar none. Doing the master's program before was easy. . . . Comparatively speaking, this is so much harder." CJ shared that it made her happy and "proud that I'm surviving it . . . It was kind of a shock, being differently and more than I ever have. But I feel like I'm getting a really good education here." She realized that she had gained "all kinds of background information that's talking at me in my brain," and she hoped she would be able to "make good use of this, instead of just enjoying the conversation in my head."

Pauline probably expressed the feelings of many of the participants when she said, "Overall it's been just an invaluable experience for me. It feels like such a privilege.

Every class that I've taken I always feel like, I can't express well enough the privilege that it is to be here and to take these classes." The Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis found that midlife students in their MSW program "did well, they went out and accomplished their plans, they got into the careers they wanted[,] and they looked very favorably at their experience." Likewise, the midlife women in my study had an overall positive view of their experiences as theological school students.

## Thematic Description of Midlife Women's Experiences of Seminary

Considering these highlights, the contextual description of midlife women seminarians' lives in Chapter 5, and Chapter 6's analyses of midlife women's experiences with theological school, several themes emerge. Here, I will pull out what seem to me to be the most salient themes and bring them together into what can be considered a general description of the nature and meaning of midlife women's theological school experiences.

Attending theological school is a meaningful, affirming, and growth-producing experience for midlife women. They learn to organize and express their theological thinking in clearer ways while developing a stronger sense of self and voice. Their self-confidence increases as they become aware of and experience affirmations of their own strengths and spiritual gifts. Midlife women are touched by the respect given to them by professors, staff, and students of various ages. They enjoy developing relationships with diverse people, and they become more open to various perspectives through sharing with people from diverse backgrounds and theological locations. They also become less judgmental of people who are different from them and grow in their desire to address

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Martin, "Survey."

injustices in the world. Relationships at home, church, and school sustain them and help them to work through difficulties they encounter in their coursework. Theological school is challenging and tough for midlife women, but it is also rewarding. Midlife women feel blessed to be able to engage in this endeavor at this time in their lives, and they are grateful for the excellent education they receive.

# Implications for Graduate Theological Education

Participants in my study expressed many complaints regarding classes, professors, staff, and structures at CST. They also offered suggestions for changes and improvements. From these and the themes that emerged in Chapters 5 and 6, several implications for theological teaching and education can be discerned. In this chapter division, I will first consider what theological schools can do to improve the educational experiences of midlife women students, and then I will look at what my study suggests are best practices for theological educators.

# **Institutional Structures and Staff**

Interactions with staff and administrators, including deans, registrars, financial aid officers, and administrative assistants, can affect midlife women's perceptions of their whole theological school experience to a greater extent than may be expected. These people are part of the cultural climate of the theological school institution, so unprofessional and insensitive behaviors on their part can stain the view people have of the institution and the education it provides. Therefore, theological school administrators are advised to make efforts to ensure their staff are trained to act professionally and respectfully toward students and that they are educated to be sensitive to people of

various cultures, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and religious traditions.

Working women and women commuting long distances (or times) to seminary cannot afford to drive to seminary several days a week to attend classes and workshops, do group projects, or visit the library. They need their courses to be bunched together into a couple of days, and they need course schedules to stay consistent, so they can plan their lives around them. Alternatively, midlife women seminary students would appreciate being able to take courses online or in other long-distance learning formats. They also desire library hours that extend beyond class times long enough that they are able to do research, find books and other materials, and make copies of materials they cannot take home for more than a few hours. Since many midlife women do commute to school, they appreciate having comfortable places on campus to rest, eat, and study between classes. It would also be helpful for them to have places where they can safely and securely store their things, so they do not have to leave them in boiling hot or freezing cold cars.

#### **Professors and Teaching**

David Lose, a biblical preaching professor at Luther Seminary, asserts, "Teaching is about *penultimate transformation*. That is, through our teaching we invite students into a process of growth, development, and transformation of their beliefs and practices." Similarly, Diamond Cephus, a participant in the Lexington Seminar: Theological Teaching for the Church's Ministries, observes that faculty in seminaries and theological schools often possess as "a core expectation of their teaching" a desire "that their work

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> David J. Lose, "'How Do We Make Space for Students to Seek Truth?': Teaching with Conviction," in *Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts: Promises and Contradictions*, ed. Mary E. Hess and Stephen D. Brookfield (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 2008), 20.

with students [will] be somehow transformative in nature." Transformation has various meanings in the field of education, but the understanding of transformative learning that is probably most familiar to adult educators is the one found in the works of Jack Mezirow, who first presented his theory of "perspective transformation" in 1978.

Mezirow defines transformative learning as

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings."<sup>11</sup>

Mezirow has been critiqued for his emphasis on rationality and critical reflection and discourse as required elements of the transformative learning process and for his neglect of the impact of context on how people know, learn, and change. Ironically, Mezirow's theory is based on a study of women participating in specialized college reentry programs in the 1970s, women who probably did not emphasize critical thinking and rational discourse as Mezirow does.

Brooks, who focuses on women's transformative learning, provides a more encompassing definition of the process: it "is learning that leads to some type of fundamental change in the learners' sense of themselves, their worldviews, their understanding of their pasts, and their orientation to the future." This type of learning

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Diamond Cephus, "Rehabilitating Prejudice: Framing Issues of Diversity in Theological Education," in *Practical Wisdom: On Theological Teaching and Learning*, ed. Malcolm L. Warford (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 221.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 167.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Ann K. Brooks, "Transformation," in *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning*, Elisabeth Hayes, Daniele D. Flannery, et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 140.

goes beyond mere changes in views or beliefs. As adult educator Carolyn Clark explains,

Transformational learning produces more far-reaching changes in the learners than does learning in general, and . . . these changes have a significant impact on the learners' subsequent experiences. In short, transformational learning *shapes* people; they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize. <sup>13</sup>

Some of the women in my study indicated they had or were undergoing processes of transformation as a result of their theological school experiences. Many of the participants expressed appreciation for being challenged to think critically, to develop their own views, and to open themselves to various perspectives. Midlife is a time when adults become more tolerant and accepting of ambiguity and paradox in their lives and faith. Since transformative learning usually involves going through a liminal, in-between phase wrought with ambiguity, midlife students may be the ones most prepared to enter into a transformative learning process. My analysis of participants' experiences with theological education suggests that if professors are going to aim to teach for transformation, they need to engage in relational, connected pedagogies that build trust and a sense of safety in the classroom. This means they also need to be credible and authentic.

Credibility, authenticity, and trust. Brookfield asserts that teacher credibility and teacher authenticity are "at the center of the cluster of characteristics that make teachers more trustworthy in students' eyes." Without trust in their teachers, students are unwilling to take risks and fully engage in the learning process. According to Brookfield, "The more profound and meaningful the learning is to students, the more they need to be

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> M. Carolyn Clark, "Transformational Learning," in *An Update on Adult Learning Theory*, ed. Sharan B. Merriam, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 57 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 47.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Brookfield, Skillful Teacher, 163.

able to trust their teachers."<sup>15</sup> Theological education touches on what is most profound and meaningful to people—their faith and their understandings of God and themselves. In *Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts*, a volume created as a result of work done by Brookfield and a group of faculty at Luther Seminary, New Testament professor Matthew Skinner explores issues of trust in theological education, particularly classes in biblical studies. Skinner claims that the subject matter and nature of theological education means

theological educators must tend to a layer of trust that is not immediately relevant to other fields of study. The dynamics of faith and theological education's overt attention to the reality of God make it crucial that students trust their professors as reliable theological guides who are attuned to distinct kinds of spiritual commitments. <sup>16</sup>

Trust alleviates the fear that arises when theological studies lead to the possibility of a "changed outlook in one's theological vision, especially when a student cannot foresee what that new vision will look like or what it will mean for notions of personal faith or vocation."<sup>17</sup>

Skinner refers to teacher credibility as "professional trustworthiness" and teacher authenticity as "personal trustworthiness." He adds "spiritual trustworthiness" as a "third layer of trust that effective theological education demands." To demonstrate that one is professionally trustworthy, a professor must not only make it clear that she has a

<sup>15</sup> Brookfield, Skillful Teacher, 163.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Matthew L. Skinner, "How Can Students Learn to Trust Us as We Challenge Who They Are?": Building Trust and Trustworthiness in a Biblical Studies Classroom," in *Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts: Promises and Contradictions*, ed. Mary E. Hess and Stephen D. Brookfield (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 2008), 99.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Skinner, 93.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Skinner, 99-100.

<sup>19</sup> Skinner, 99.

strong knowledge and understanding of her subject matter, she must exercise pedagogical and organizational competence. The midlife women in my study revealed that professional trustworthiness was important to them in their comments about teachers being knowledgeable, managing classroom discussions well, expressing clear expectations, staying on track with the syllabus or making reasonable adjustments, and guiding students toward an adequate grasp of the content and skills required for their courses. Doctoral programs tend to focus on developing scholars who are experts in their fields and give little, if any, attention to teaching future professors how to be educators. Rosell, a seminary professor, observes,

Few seminary professors have ever given much attention to how they teach. . . . The assumption seems to be this: If a person knows his or her field, that person will be able to teach it effectively. As any student can tell us, however, such an assumption cannot always be sustained and is either naïve or simply obstinate. Yet many of us continue to enter the classroom without ever having read a book, taken a course, or even attended a workshop on the subject of pedagogy. <sup>20</sup>

A couple of my participants expressed similar sentiments. One stated, "A great scholar is not always a great teacher." She felt that CST does a "disservice" to its students to "emphasize publishing." Another woman, who had a background in education, commented that some professors "really need to take some courses in how to be an educator, in my own humble opinion." Expertise in one's subject matter may build credibility, but if one does not practice the skills of a good educator, professional trustworthiness will be lacking.

For Skinner, developing personal trustworthiness or authenticity entails educating

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Rosell, 182.

in a humane way "that invites and encourages students." Brookfield names four behaviors that students recognize as evidence of teacher authenticity:

(1) teachers' words and actions are congruent; (2) teachers admit to error, acknowledge fallibility, and make mistakes in full public view of learners; (3) teachers allow aspects of their personhood outside their role as teachers to be revealed to students; and (4) teachers respect learners by listening carefully to students' expressions of concern, by taking care to create opportunities for students' voices to be heard, and by being open to changing their practice as a result of students' suggestions.<sup>22</sup>

With the exception of revealing fallibility, all the items that Skinner and Brookfield list were themes in my research participants' discussions of their classroom experiences, desired qualities in professors, and experiences with assignments and grades. They appreciated professors who built personal trust by sharing themselves and making connections between course material and their lives, inviting questions, listening thoughtfully to students and responding positively to their questions and concerns, demonstrating respect for students, and honoring students' experiences and life situations.

A spiritually trustworthy professor is one who reveals a personal commitment to God and how that "imbues her work as a scholar and seminary professor." In addition, spiritually trustworthy educators communicate to their students that they realize what they are teaching "matters deeply for questions of personal faith and self-understanding," and they provide space for reflection and open dialogue about the theological, practical, and personal implications of course material. Along the way, they help students see that their faith can "grow and change in positive ways as a result of deep engagement with the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Skinner, 101.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Brookfield, Skillful Teacher, 164.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Skinner, 104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Skinner, 104.

material."<sup>25</sup> In my study, students' desires for spiritually trustworthy professors were usually expressed implicitly rather than explicitly. However, there were a few comments like Ann's: "What am I gonna do with it at my church? What am I gonna do with it in the pool pit? What is this useful for? How have you informed me?" Vicky expressed appreciation for a New Testament professor who differentiated between fact and faith for her, while Dena lamented the lack of God-talk on the part of her Christian professors: "They don't talk about God quite enough. It's interesting." However, one Bible professor was "all God all the time. So that was fabulous, fabulous, fabulous." But then, "My New Testament professor I don't think believes in God, so that was a whole other interesting experience."

A couple women expressed a desire to have a space and time in which to share personal stories of faith and spirituality. Jackie reflected,

It's a shame that we don't know each other's faith stories. The only way you're gonna find out is to cut out some time and ask someone. It may have come up in one or two classes. Not in mine. Not of any depth—you might have had five minutes to tell your story or something like that.

#### Nancy shared:

So when I feel the Holy Spirit at church, and I feel the Holy Spirit at the Eucharist rail, I have a very visceral, I have a very physical—my Christianity is very physical. And it has a mystical component. And I wish that we could talk and experience those things more here. 'Cause everybody's got a story; everybody has experienced God in some way or they wouldn't be here. But when do we get to hear these stories? . . . . But I think that we need to be talking about, more about what is happening to us—what really is this? Not just how much information we can cram into our poor little brains, and, can you think like an ethicist. . . . That's what I wish I got more of here. That's one of the reasons why I'm here, too. It's like, what did happen to me? What was that? It's happened to other people.

If such stories and experiences could be shared and discussed in the context of theology,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Skinner, 104.

Christian history, psychology of religion, or Bible courses, these courses would be become more meaningful. A professor who engaged faith stories with respect for the tellers and their experiences would develop trust and community in the classroom.

Theologian Mary Pellauer asserts that sharing and listening to stories is theology:

"... I have a very deep sense that there is nothing more beautiful than listening to people tell their stories about faith and God. They express, as nothing else can, who we really are, and what we really believe in, and the meaning in our lives.... If there's anything worth calling theology, it is listening to people's stories—listening to them and honoring and cherishing them, and weaving them together, and asking them to become even more brightly beautiful than they already are." <sup>26</sup>

Inviting the sharing of personal stories and experiences in the classroom is characteristic of relational and engaged feminist pedagogies.

Relational, engaged feminist pedagogy. Tisdell asserts that feminist pedagogy is not only "about women as learners," it "is about stories—about sharing stories, feeling stories, analyzing stories, theorizing stories, reframing them in some sort of educational space, and encouraging new action in light of our educational re-storying experience together." As Nancy and Jackie noted, there were a lack of opportunities to share and hear students' stories in their classes at CST. Nancy wanted an opportunity to explore and analyze the meaning of her spiritual experiences and to develop knowledge through such a process. Nonetheless, hearing others' stories seemed to be a significant aspect of several of my participants' learning experiences as theological school students. They expressed appreciation for professors who shared personal narratives that connected with course content, and they enjoyed hearing the stories and perspectives of students from

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Mary D. Pellauer in Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985), 133.

<sup>27</sup> Tisdell. 155.

diverse backgrounds and points of view. The value that many women placed on small-group discussions in classes, study groups, and socializing with other students (particularly other midlife women) also suggests the importance to midlife women of telling and hearing one another's stories and experiences, since these are contexts where such sharing is likely to occur. Narrative weaves intellect, affect, and spirit together, and "personal storytelling functions as a way of establishing relational intimacy." Thus, narrative is a holistic way of learning. Since it engages the whole person, narrative holds significant potential for facilitating transformation of previously unexamined assumptions and perspectives. Adult educator Ann Brooks argues that "transformation through narrative is a way that seems distinctly suited to the ways in which women think about themselves and interact with others." As research participants shared with me the ways in which they had changed as a result of their theological school experiences, it was evident that narratives played a key role in their transformative learning processes.

Feminist pedagogies value experience as a source of knowing and thus, they "frequently begin with students' personal experiences, develop knowledge from those experiences, and then compare that knowledge to existing texts, norms, and practices." Midlife women bring a vast amount of experience with them to theological school: they have worked in various positions, volunteered for their churches, suffered serious illnesses, lost loved ones, survived divorce, raised children, and so on. The women in my

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Brooks, 152.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Brooks, 153.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Becky Ropers-Huilman and Betsy Palmer, "Feminist and Civic Education: Bridging Parallel Approaches to Teaching and Learning," in *Most College Students Are Women: Implications for Teaching, Learning, and Policy*, ed. Jeanie K. Allen, Diane R. Dean, and Susan J. Bracken (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2008), 12, 17.

study wanted their experiences to be heard and honored in the classroom. They wanted to share their experiences and the knowledge and wisdom they had gained from them, so others might learn from their stories and also because they were personally engaged in making connections between course content and their own lives. Cephus observes,

Because so many of the students in seminary today are adult learners who bring with them a wide array of talents and experience, it is vitally important to create sufficient time, space, and opportunity within the classroom to draw upon this fund of rich experiential knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

He suggests a couple ways this might be done: students, either individually or in teams, could lead "a portion of seminar classes in which they present a theological topic and offer their own fund of experiences as a starting point for applying their understanding"; or, in a preaching class, the professor could build in "opportunities for students to reflect on the way in which their personal and cultural experiences affect the way in which they are inclined to approach preaching."<sup>32</sup>

Stephen Brookfield and Mary Hess assert, "In a real sense each of us is the sum total of our experiences; not to recognize the importance of these experiences is not to recognize a person's value." To ignore students' experiences is to ignore who they are. Therefore, an "attitude of respect for students' experiences" is a must in a theological school environment that affirms the worth of each individual. Asking students to analyze their experiences and to place them in dialogue with texts they are reading

<sup>34</sup> Brookfield and Hess, 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Cephus, 222.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Cephus, 222.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen D. Brookfield and Mary E. Hess, "How Can We Teach Authentically? Reflective Practice in the Dialogical Classroom," in *Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts: Promises and Contradictions*, ed. Mary E. Hess and Stephen D. Brookfield (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 2008), 9.

demonstrates respect by validating the students' experiences as sources for learning.

According to educators Morris Fiddler and Catherine Marienau, "Personal experience serves as a critical source of motivation, learning, and meaning making to help the developing woman heighten awareness of her self; . . . and carry on an invested dialogue with others about ideas, topics, and experiences." When teachers engage learners in reflective conversation with their experiences, one another, and the material, students develop critical thinking skills that they are able to apply to learning in other contexts. 36

Honoring students' stories and experiences is a form of care for them. Hooks claims, "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin." Educator Laurent Daloz agrees. He argues that teaching is "preeminently an act of care" and that teaching is excellent when teachers "care—both about their subjects and for their students." Caring for students means responding to their "unique beings" and connecting with them. It means being concerned, "not simply with how much knowledge our students may acquire but also with how they are making meaning of that knowledge and how it is affecting their capacity to go on learning."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Morris Fiddler and Catherine Marienau, "Linking Learning, Teaching, and Development," in *Learning Environments for Women's Adult Development: Bridges Toward Change*, ed. Kathleen Taylor and Catherine Marienau, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 65 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 75.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Fiddler and Marienau, 74.

<sup>37</sup> hooks, 13

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Laurent A. Daloz, *Mentor: Guiding the Journey of Adult Learners*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 244, xiv.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> hooks, 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Daloz, 244.

cared about their learning and thinking processes, and who cared about their subject matter. These were the professors who were seen as most helpful by midlife women seminarians.

Care is one aspect of what hooks calls "progressive, holistic education" or "engaged pedagogy." She claims that this form of pedagogy is "more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being." Not only does holistic education aim to empower and free students, it engages teachers in learning and growing as well. The emphasis on well-being "means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being," so they can teach in a manner that leads to healing and wholeness. We teach who we are," Palmer says. If teachers do not know who they are, they cannot know who their students are, because they will see them through the lenses of their own unexamined lives (or shadow sides, to use Jung's term). If educators do not see their students in their uniqueness, they will not be able to teach them well.

When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject—not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth.<sup>44</sup>

When teachers do not teach from a place of self-understanding, integrity, and striving for self-actualization, they will seem less personally trustworthy. Without a depth of knowledge of self and subject, a professor's teaching will lack passion. Passion motivates

42 hooks, 15, 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> hooks, 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Palmer, 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Palmer, 2.

learning and invites the spirit of transformation into the educational space. Midlife women seminarians in my research group were in awe of professors who were so passionate about their subject matter that they had dedicated their lives to it. One woman commented on how quickly and easily one professor referenced "names of people and places, and, you know, it's like it's his children." Participants' comments also indicated that the professors who had touched them deeply and engaged them in transformative learning were ones who had done their own work toward self-understanding and wholeness.

Teaching for change and transformation. Daloz uses the metaphor of "transformational journey" for adult learning and speaks of the archetypal Mentor "as a guide for the journey."<sup>45</sup> Professors often serve as embodiments of this Mentor archetype for students. According to Daloz, "Mentors seem to do three fairly distinct things: they support, they challenge, and they provide vision."<sup>46</sup> Support is that exercise of care that engenders trust. Mentors support students by affirming the validity of their present experiences. They help students feel understood by demonstrating empathy for their feelings and comprehension of their words. 47 Students trust mentoring professors as guides along their educational journeys "because they have been there before. They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers, and point out unexpected delights along the way."48 Comments by participants in my study revealed that these forms of support from professors were valuable to them.

<sup>45</sup> Daloz, 16. <sup>46</sup> Daloz, 206. <sup>47</sup> Daloz, 206.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Daloz, 18.

When one has a guide one trusts, then it is easier to find the courage to move ahead and "to let go of what we no longer need and to receive what we do." This is what occurs in transformative learning.

Once a mentor has established a foundation of trust and support with her or his students, they will be more open to engaging the challenges the mentor issues to them. As Skinner observes, "Students who trust their professor's expertise and commitment to fostering a generative and humane learning environment will themselves be more willing to accept the risks that are inherent in the critical exploration of texts, ideas, assumptions, and their consequences." The mentoring professor may challenge students by questioning their tacit assumptions, introducing contradictory ideas, or refusing to answer questions with quick and simple answers. For Daloz,

The function of challenge is to open a gap between learner and environment, a gap that creates tension in the learner, calling out for closure. The work of closing that gap strengthens our sense of agency, of power in the world.<sup>51</sup>

Brookfield points out that "the teachers' right to challenge students is not a given." To build trust and alleviate fear of the formational and transformational processes of theological education, seminary professors need to show students that they also are constantly in formation, that they are "continually forced to question and rethink beliefs and actions with which [they] have grown comfortable." Professors can do this by modeling how they grapple with ideas and approaches that are challenging to them.

Brookfield and Hess contend that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Daloz, 206.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Skinner, 102.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Daloz, 206.

<sup>52</sup> Brookfield, Skillful Teacher, 165.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Brookfield and Hess. 12-13.

before asking students to engage in any learning process that involves risk, discomfort, or challenge (things that always accompany thinking critically about faith, for example) we need to model in front of them our own engagement with similar learning tasks. Our responsibility is to show them that we regard opening ourselves up to different perspectives and new ideas to be part of what it means to be a questing, spiritual being.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, if professors want students to think critically about and question some of their "most cherished assumptions," they can best encourage these practices by demonstrating a critical approach to their own beliefs and actions. 55

However, students need an idea of where they are heading. They need to know that their professors are not leading them into a desert where they will be left without food or water to survive. Thus, mentors provide vision and help people see that there is a way through and out of the desert of theological deconstruction and dislocation. Skinner suggests that seminary professors can defuse fear and gain trust "by regularly naming and acknowledging the spiritual anxieties that students may be encountering" in their courses and by reassuring them that others have, like them, experienced, resisted, and survived "the dislocation that theological education effects." Transformation rarely takes place quickly; it is usually a long journey. When the building-block structure of one's religious and spiritual perspectives has tumbled down and one keeps receiving new blocks to build with, it may take some time to fit all the pieces together into a new structure. Yet, "by their very existence, mentors provide proof that the journey can be made, the leap taken." 57

Working through the challenges to religious assumptions that one encounters at

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Brookfield and Hess, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Brookfield and Hess, 13; Brookfield, Skillful Teacher, 172.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Skinner, 111.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Daloz, 207.

seminary takes time. Reflecting on assumptions he held as a beginning college teacher, Old Testament professor Rolf Jacobson observes that he "held the unexamined assumption that good teachers are demanding teachers and that demanding teachers are difficult teachers." Being difficult and demanding meant assigning loads of work for students to do. As he reflected on this practice, he realized that when he required too much work, students were forced to rush past challenging concepts without engaging them, "therefore making it very likely that they would dismiss" them. <sup>59</sup> When students do not have time to reflect on what they are reading and hearing, they cannot begin to question their assumptions and enter into a transformative learning process. Jacobson shares that he was able to engage his own assumptions by realizing some important things about the best teachers he had had:

They were not always the teachers who demanded the most quantity, but the best quality. They were not always the teachers who assigned the most reading or piled on the most assignments, but the ones whose readings made a difference and transformed me in some way, whose assignments reshaped my mind. 60

One of the biggest and most common complaints I heard from women in my research group was that there was too much work assigned, particularly reading. Participants lamented that there was not enough time to read, process, and reflect on everything. This was frustrating, because they wanted to learn and grow. Having recently graduated, Julie shared that she had received a lot of information and input during her time as a seminarian, but now she needed some time to "digest" it all; there had not been enough

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Rolf Jacobson, "'How Do Students Experience the Teacher?': Knowing Who You Are as a Teacher (and Knowing that Your Students Do Not)," in *Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts: Promises and Contradictions*, ed. Mary E. Hess and Stephen D. Brookfield (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 2008), 80.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Jacobson, 81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Jacobson, 79.

time to process and digest what she was learning when she was a student. Likewise, Nancy wrote,

I cannot remember anything that I wrote because I did it all in such a rush. A professor from Germany said that for divinity schools in her country, they take their classes and do their research and are given 2-3 months to write their papers, so they can reflect on what they have learned!!! That sounds more like what divinity school should be about.

Even within current systems of theological education in the United States changes can be made to allow more time for reflection. Jacobson suggests,

A more robust way to be demanding as [a] teacher may be to slow the pace at which students are bombarded with information and instead structure learning experiences that require the students to own the material, to make mental adjustments, to be transformed.<sup>61</sup>

Reflection papers are one method for encouraging students to engage subject matter in a personal way. Class time can also be set aside for reflecting and journaling about an idea that has been presented in an assigned reading or lecture.

Skinner advises not only having ample time for reflection, but for discussion as well. Discussion "helps students test ideas and lets professors assess how students are responding."<sup>62</sup> As noted before, many women process and learn material best through interactions with others. Through conversation, women can share tentative thoughts and emerging concepts and receive feedback from others and assistance in developing their ideas. Listening to students' thought processes, professors can respond in ways that will be most helpful and mentor them on their transformational journeys. Skinner observes that commuter students' schedules often "prohibit them from engaging in impromptu discussions with others during meals or leisure time," so "scheduled, in-class

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Jacobson, 80. <sup>62</sup> Skinner, 109.

discussions" are necessary to meet these students' needs. 63

Daloz argues that transformation is not complete until students are able to bring to conscious awareness, name, and reflect upon the changes they have experienced. Only then will the changes "stay put."64 Mentors can assist with this final step of self-reflection and naming. In Mezirow's model of perspective transformation, individuals explore "options for new roles, relationships, and actions," plan "a course of action," acquire "knowledge and skills for implementing" their plans, build "competence and selfconfidence in new roles and relationships," and finally, integrate these changes into their lives based on their new perspectives. 65 Through their experiences as theological school students, many of the participants in my study were engaging in these dimensions of transformative learning. They were learning to see themselves in new roles as ministers, developing their skills and expertise, gaining self-confidence, and trying to figure out how to integrate and apply what they were learning in their lives and ministries. While few of them had likely experienced a complete perspective transformation in the way that Mezirow understands this concept, they had all changed and developed in ways that were profound and meaningful. Professors who practiced relational, engaged pedagogies likely contributed extensively to these women's processes of change and growth.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

My first suggestions for further research are based on the limitations of my study.

To determine the uniqueness of midlife women's experiences, it would be necessary to engage in a similar study with male midlife seminarians and with women seminarians

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Skinner, 109.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Daloz, 207.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Mezirow, 168-69.

who are younger or older than the women in my research group. Studying midlife women at other United Methodist theological schools would provide a comparison with women at schools from the same denomination, while interviewing women at seminaries with various denominational affiliations and theological orientations would broaden the scope of this research. It would be especially interesting to compare my study with data from midlife women at Fuller Seminary, since a few women in my research group had wanted to or considered attending that school. Additionally fruitful would be research that examined and compared midlife women's reasons for pursuing graduate degrees in various fields, thus determining if there is something distinctive about midlife women who decide to go to theological school.

To better understand midlife women seminarians as learners, I would recommend using interview questions such as those from Belenky et al.'s or Baxter Magolda's studies to determine women's epistemological locations. <sup>66</sup> Specific questions could be designed to ascertain how participants come to know religiously and what their sources of authority are for their theological beliefs. Conducting interviews at the beginning and end of students' seminary careers would provide a view of how midlife women change in their ways of knowing as a result of their theological studies. Additional questions could chart changes in perceptions of self, others, and the world and in theological understandings and perspectives of religious traditions. In doing this, a researcher could also probe the reasons for or influences on such changes and transformations. Such information would be invaluable for theological school educators.

<sup>66</sup> Belenky et al., 231-36; Baxter Magolda, 411-26.

# Appendix A

# Recruiting Email

Subject: CST women between 35 and 64 years old: please read

Hi,

Do you think of yourself as a midlife or middle-aged woman? Do you find these terms offensive, demeaning, disconcerting, or dismaying? Are you not sure if you're in midlife (or whatever you want to call it), but you feel a definite distance between you and those young students straight out of college? If your answer is yes to any of these questions or you are simply intrigued, then please read on.

I'm a Ph.D. student in religious education, and I am trying to do research for my dissertation regarding midlife women attending CST. This research has three aims: (1) to identify the reasons why midlife women choose to attend theological school; (2) to identify particular struggles, needs, issues, or problems experienced by midlife women while attending theological school; and (3) to identify and carry out actions that will make life better for female midlife theological students at CST. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook is the chairperson of my dissertation committee.

I would like to invite you to participate by filling out a questionnaire or by agreeing to be interviewed by me. I would also like to invite you to be my co-researcher by participating in a participatory action research (PAR) group, which will involve working together with other women to address the aims of this study. I, as the primary researcher, will facilitate this process, serve as a resource person, and also share with you as a companion midlife student (yes, I'm over 35). We will meet once a week or as needed during the semester, for one to two hours at a time (depending upon schedules).

I have set up an initial PAR group meeting for Wednesday, February 10th from 11:30-12:45\* in the Moore Multicultural Center (2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the library). If you are interested in working with other midlife women to make your experience as a CST student better, please attend or contact me if you are unable to attend. (This is limited to master's degree students.) Bring your lunch, and I'll bring some dessert. (I realize there's a luncheon at this time, but this was the best time I could find for this week.)

If you would only be interested in being interviewed or filling out a survey questionnaire, please let me know. This includes doctoral students. If you are interested in filling out a questionnaire, I can email it to you, you can fill it out, and you can email it back to me or return it anonymously to me through campus mail.

Women from diverse backgrounds are encouraged to participate.

To respond or to ask questions, please email me at <u>Vicki.Wiltse@cst.edu</u> or call me at (909) 621-9534.

Below, you will find some thoughts about what it might mean to be in midlife. Thank you for taking the time to read this and respond.

<sup>\*</sup> Chapel services were supposed to end around 11:15 on Wednesdays. Afternoon classes began at 1:00.

Best regards, Vicki

Some signs that you might be a midlife woman:

Your old life is no longer meaningful or satisfying or your old values no longer make sense.

It's occurred to you that you've been living someone else's life, and you don't want to do that anymore.

Emotions that you thought you buried or overcame long ago suddenly arise; maybe some emotions come out of nowhere. For example, you suddenly feel strong anger at a parent when you didn't realize you had that anger in you.

You find yourself saying things you normally wouldn't say or behaving in ways (or wanting to) that you don't recognize as yourself.

You feel out of control, confused, disoriented. "Who am I?" you often ask yourself.

You find yourself wanting to explore unlived dreams or unexpressed talents. You pick up a new hobby or learn how to do something you always wanted to do.

You woke up one morning, decided you wanted to do something different with your life, and ended up here at CST.

## Appendix B

### CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATING IN A MIDLIFE WOMEN'S PAR GROUP

Researcher: Vicki Wiltse, CST Ph.D. candidate in religious education

Contact info: Vicki. Wiltse@cst.edu or (909) 621-9534

Dissertation committee chairperson: Dr. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook Contact info: SKujawaHolbrook@cst.edu or (909) 447-2592

# Objectives and methods of the study

There are three aims for this study: (1) to identify the reasons why midlife women choose to attend theological school; (2) to identify particular struggles, needs, issues, or problems experienced by midlife women while attending theological school; and (3) to identify and carry out actions that will make life better for female midlife theological students.

Three methods will be used: questionnaires, interviews, and participatory action research.

## What will be involved in participating?

Participation in the participatory action research (PAR) group will involve working together with other women to address the aims of this study. The primary researcher (myself) will facilitate this process, serve as a resource person, and act as a coparticipant as appropriate, while you will be a co-researcher. We will meet once a week or as needed during the semester, for one to two hours at a time (depending upon schedules). No activities will extend past May 31<sup>st</sup>.

#### Who will have access to the data collected?

I will take notes on and possibly record group meetings. My dissertation committee, consisting of Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, Frank Rogers, and Kathleen Greider, may request access to these documentations. Information from the interviews may also be shared anonymously with the participatory action research group consisting of midlife women students at CST. The documentations will be kept indefinitely in my personal possession.

### Potential risks and benefits associated with participation:

While attempts will be made to keep personally identifying information confidential, there is a risk that this confidentiality will be breached. You may be asked to step out of your comfort zone, and the process may be emotionally and psychologically draining. Actions taken may have their own risks. Benefits may include finding support, making new friends, and improving the CST experience for yourself and others.

#### Participant's rights

Your participation in this study and this group is completely voluntary. You may ask any questions regarding the research, and I will answer them as fully as I can. You

may withdraw from the research group and study at any time, or you may ask that certain things you have shared or done not be included in publications.

### What will be published/shared?

The activities and findings of the PAR group will be published as part of my doctoral dissertation. You will be able to read and respond to the dissertation before it reaches final draft form. I may also publish an article and/or book that uses this research, and I may share it with other professionals, e.g., as part of a conference presentation. In all these cases, your name will be kept confidential, and I may alter some identifying details in order to further protect your anonymity.

Consent: I agree to participate in the PAR dimension of this study. Vicki may use data

### PRINCIPLES FOR PAR MEETINGS

We will seek to exercise or practice . . .

- respect for one another (no shaming, blaming, or attacking)
- trust and confidentiality
- openness, honesty, and truth-telling
- attentive and empathic listening
- \* mutual invitation and mutual empowerment.

# Appendix C

# MIDLIFE WOMEN QUESTIONNAIRE\*

If you do not feel comfortable answering a particular question, feel free to leave it blank. If you don't know how to answer (maybe the question is unclear), please say so, or if it's not applicable to you, then put "n/a." Keep in mind that your answers will be used for research purposes only and that your identity will be kept confidential. By completing this questionnaire, you are granting me permission to use this material in my study. See the end of the questionnaire for more information about the study.

Please email the questions and your answers back to me, or, to remain anonymous, put them in an envelope with my name on it and "W259," and put it in campus mail. Thank you for participating in this dissertation research.

## Life

Please sketch out the path or major events of your adult life. For example, I went to college, moved back home and worked as a substitute teacher for 3 years, came to CST for my M.Div., during which time I got married, then I moved to Ohio, eventually found a full-time teaching job, got divorced, left my full-time job, eventually found part-time work to sustain me, applied to one Ph.D. program and didn't get accepted, then applied to 3 programs, got accepted by CST, and came back after a 5-year hiatus.

Do you think of yourself as middle-aged or in midlife? If so, what does that mean to you? Do you have another way of naming/defining the stage of life you are in?

Do you feel like you're going through a midlife crisis or transition? Do you feel like you have experienced this in the past?

## School

Why did you choose to attend a theological school (CST) or pursue a theological degree at this time in your life? Why now and not earlier? If you experienced a "call," please tell me about the nature of the call – how did you experience it? How did you know it was a call?

What is your goal in attending CST? What do you want to get from your time at CST?

How does your family feel about your pursuit of theological education and your goals (e.g., ordained ministry)? Are they supportive? In what way, e.g., grudgingly,

<sup>\*</sup>Items in bold were elements that were added after I sent out the initial questionnaire on February 25, 2010. This version was sent out on April 5, 2010 to women who had expressed interest in participating in this study but had not filled out a questionnaire or been interviewed yet.

enthusiastically?

Tell me about your experience with classes at CST. What has been helpful? Not helpful?

What kinds of courses are challenging? Helpful? Meaningful? Why? In what ways?

What qualities are helpful in a teacher?

What kinds of teaching/learning styles do you prefer (e.g., lectures, class discussions, practical activities, a mixture)?

What kinds of assignments do you prefer? Why?

Do you find it easy to speak up and share your views in classes? When you do speak up, do you feel like your voice is heard? Is your perspective honored? If not, please share a story or examples.

Have you experienced ageism, sexism, or other prejudices at CST? If so, please explain and provide examples/stories.

What stands out for you in your experience at CST? What has been most meaningful for you? What has been most empowering?

Are there other things you would like to share about your experience as a student at CST, such as disappointments, struggles, achievements, highlights?

### Faith/Spirituality/Religion

Tell me about your spiritual life, whatever that means to you (feel free to offer a definition of spirituality). What does it look and feel like? What are its contours, its dimensions? In other words, what form(s) or shape(s) does it take? One approach might be to discuss what connects you with the Divine or with a sense of the sacred, e.g., a daily spiritual practice, worship services, an attitude toward life or others, relationships, digging in the garden, watching the sun set. You might also discuss your relationship with the Divine (God, Goddess, Christ, etc.).

What kinds of spiritual/religious practices are meaningful to you?

# What does your spiritual life mean for you?

Has there been a connection between your educational experience at CST and your spiritual life? How so? In other words, has your spirituality or your spiritual life changed as a result of your theological education, and if so, how?

As a result of attending CST, have you experienced any changes in how you experience or view your faith or religious tradition? If so, please describe them.

How does your faith community view you (as a midlife woman, as a theological student), and how do you feel about that?

## Summative and Miscellaneous Questions

As a theological student, where or how do you find community?

Are there struggles or issues you have encountered that are particular to being a midlife woman attending theological school?

Have you experienced any changes in how you view yourself as a result of attending CST? If so, what are they?

Have you experienced any changes in your perspective on the world and other people? If so, please explain.

## **Demographics**

What is your birthdate?

What is your current age?

How do you name your racial/ethnic identity?

What is your sexual orientation?

What is your marital/relationship status?

Do you have children? If so, what are their ages and how many are living with you?

Do you have a parent(s) for whom you are the primary caregiver and/or do you have a parent(s) living with you?

What is your religious affiliation?

What program are you in?

What year did you start this program?

Approximately how many credits do you take each semester?

What is your educational background (e.g., prior degrees) and prior specialization(s) (e.g., majors/minors)?

How many years passed between your last experience with school and entering this program?

How many hours per week have you been working while attending school?

Are you commuting to school from off campus? If so, how far? What is your school-commute time schedule (i.e., do you drive in 2 days/week, fly in and stay one night . . . ?) If you spend the night, where do you stay?

Besides work, what kinds of financial resources are you drawing on to get you through school (e.g., loans, scholarships, investments, family)?

Pseudonym (fake name) that you would like me to use for you in publications:

Would you like me to give you credit (using your real name) in the acknowledgments section of my dissertation for participating in this project? If so, please provide your real name below or in a separate communication.

If you don't mind me possibly asking you follow-up questions, please provide your name, phone number, and email address here:

Researcher: Vicki Wiltse, CST Ph.D. candidate in religious education

Contact info: Vicki. Wiltse@cst.edu or (909) 621-9534

Dissertation committee chairperson: Dr. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook Contact info: SKujawaHolbrook@cst.edu or (909) 447-2592

## Objectives and methods of the study

There are three aims for this study: (1) to identify the reasons why midlife women choose to attend theological school; (2) to discover the experiences of midlife women while attending theological school, and in particular, to identify both negative (struggles, needs, issues, problems) and positive (joys, blessings, successes, affirmations) aspects of these experiences; and (3) to identify actions that theological schools and professors can take to create a more meaningful and helpful educational experience for female midlife theological students.

Three methods will be used: questionnaires, interviews, and participatory action research.

### Who will have access to the data collected?

My dissertation committee, consisting of Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, Frank Rogers,

and Kathleen Greider, may request access to the questionnaires. Information from the questionnaires may also be shared anonymously with the participatory action research group consisting of midlife women students at CST. The questionnaires will be kept indefinitely in my personal possession.

# Potential risks and benefits associated with participation:

While attempts will be made to keep personally identifying information confidential, there is a risk that this confidentiality will be breached. You may find it meaningful or helpful to fill out this questionnaire, but it may also bring up emotions or memories you do not want to deal with right now. You might also find it to be frustrating or overly time-consuming.

# Participant's rights:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may ask any questions regarding the research, and I will answer them as fully as I can. You may withdraw from the research study at any time, or you may ask that certain things you have shared not be included in publications.

## What will be published/shared?

The questionnaires are part of the research for my doctoral dissertation. If you provide me with your name, you will be able to read and respond to the dissertation before it reaches final draft form. I may also publish an article and/or book that uses this research, and I may share it with other professionals, e.g., as part of a conference presentation. In all these cases, your name will be kept confidential, and I may alter some identifying details in order to further protect your anonymity.

# Appendix D

## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

## Life

Do you think of yourself as middle-aged or in midlife? If so, what does that mean to you? Do you have another way of naming/defining the stage of life you are in?

Do you feel like you're going through a midlife crisis or transition? Do you feel like you have experienced this in the past? If so, when?

Please sketch out the path or major events of your adult life.

### School

Tell me the story of how you came to seminary. Why did you choose to attend a theological school (CST) or pursue a theological degree at this time in your life? Why now and not earlier? If you experienced a "call," please tell me about the nature of the call – how did you experience it? How did you know it was a call?

What is your goal in attending CST? What do you want to get from your time at CST?

How does your family feel about your pursuit of theological education and your goals (e.g., ordained ministry)? Are they supportive? In what way, e.g., grudgingly, enthusiastically?

Tell me about your experience with classes at CST. What has been helpful? Not helpful?

What kinds of courses are challenging? Helpful? Meaningful? Why? In what ways?

What qualities are helpful in a teacher?

What kinds of teaching/learning styles do you prefer (e.g., lectures, class discussions, practical activities, a mixture)?

What kinds of assignments do you prefer? Why?

Do you find it easy to speak up and share your views in classes? When you do speak up, do you feel like your voice is heard? Is your perspective honored? If not, please share a story or examples.

Have you experienced ageism, sexism, or other prejudices at CST? If so, please explain and provide examples/stories.

What stands out for you in your experience at CST? What has been most meaningful for you? What has been most empowering?

As a theological student, where or how do you find community?

Have you experienced any changes in how you view yourself as a result of attending CST? If so, what are they?

Have you experienced any changes in your perspective on the world and other people? If so, please explain.

Are there other things you would like to share about your experience as a student at CST, such as disappointments, struggles, achievements, highlights?

What could CST/ETSC do/have done to make your educational experience better?

Are there struggles or issues you have encountered that are particular to being a midlife woman attending theological school?

# Faith/Spirituality/Religion

Tell me about your spiritual life, whatever that means to you. What does it look and feel like? What are its contours, its dimensions? In other words, what form(s) or shape(s) does it take? One approach might be to discuss what connects you with the Divine or with a sense of the sacred, e.g., a daily spiritual practice, worship services, an attitude toward life or others, relationships, digging in the garden, watching the sun set. You might also discuss your relationship with the Divine (God, Goddess, Christ, etc.).

What kinds of spiritual/religious practices are meaningful to you?

What does your spiritual life mean for you?

Has there been a connection between your educational experience at CST and your spiritual life? How so? In other words, has your spirituality or your spiritual life changed as a result of your theological education, and if so, how?

As a result of attending CST, have you experienced any changes in how you experience or view your faith or religious tradition? If so, please describe them.

How does your faith community view you (as a midlife woman, as a theological student), and how do you feel about that?

# **Demographics**

What is your birthdate?

What is your current age?

How do you name your racial/ethnic identity?

What is your sexual orientation?

What is your marital/relationship status?

Do you have children? If so, what are their ages and how many are living with you?

Do you have a parent(s) for whom you are the primary caregiver and/or do you have a parent(s) living with you?

What is your religious affiliation?

What program are you in?

What year did you start this program?

Approximately how many credits do you take each semester?

What is your educational background (e.g., prior degrees) and prior specialization(s) (e.g., majors/minors)?

How many years passed between your last experience with school and entering this program?

How many hours per week have you been working while attending school?

Are you commuting to school from off campus? If so, how far? What is your school-commute time schedule (i.e., do you drive in 2 days/week, fly in and stay one night . . . ?) If you spend the night, where do you stay?

Besides work, what kinds of financial resources are you drawing on to get you through school (e.g., loans, scholarships, investments, family)?

## Appendix E

### **INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM**

Researcher: Vicki Wiltse, CST Ph.D. candidate in religious education

Contact info: Vicki. Wiltse@cst.edu or (909) 621-9534

Dissertation committee chairperson: Dr. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook Contact info: SKujawaHolbrook@cst.edu or (909) 447-2592

# Objectives and methods of the study

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Three methods will be used: questionnaires, interviews, and participatory action research.

### What will be involved in participating?

The interview will take approximately 1-2 hours of your time, and a second interview may be requested. We will arrange to do the interview in a location with which you feel comfortable and that has minimal distractions. I will audiotape and transcribe the interview myself.

# Who will have access to the data collected?

My dissertation committee, consisting of Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, Frank Rogers, and Kathleen Greider, may request access to the recordings and transcriptions. These documentations will be kept indefinitely in my personal possession.

### Potential risks and benefits associated with participation:

While attempts will be made to keep personally identifying information confidential, there is a risk that this confidentiality will be breached. You may find it meaningful or helpful to participate in the interview, but it may also bring up emotions or memories you do not want to deal with right now.

## Participant's rights

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may ask any questions regarding the research, and I will answer them as fully as I can. You may withdraw from the research study at any time, or you may ask that certain things you have shared not be included in publications.

#### What will be published/shared?

The interviews are part of the research for my doctoral dissertation. If you provide me with your name, you will be able to read and respond to the dissertation before it

reaches final draft form. I may also publish an article and/or book that uses this research, and I may share it with other professionals, e.g., as part of a conference presentation. In all these cases, your name will be kept confidential, and I may alter some identifying details in order to further protect your anonymity.

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